

FRANK GRUBER



The Limping Goose



**MUSEUM
STREET
THRILLER**

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I

To look at Johnny Fletcher, sprawled on the bed, with his hands under his head, you would have thought that he was doing a spot of plain ordinary loafing. But no, Johnny was really working. He was thinking.

In the bathroom, Sam Cragg splashed away as he washed out their socks and underwear. His stomach was growling, but he was reasonably happy. They'd missed breakfast and dinner the night before, but there'd be something to eat today. Johnny was thinking. He'd come up with something, he always did.

And then the man banged on the door.

Sam came out of the bathroom, holding a pair of dripping socks. He looked at Johnny, whose face was screwed up in thought as he stared at the dingy ceiling.

'Somebody's at the door, Johnny,' he announced. 'Shall I see who it is?'

'Yes,' replied Johnny vacantly.

Sam stepped to the door and opened it a few inches. A large, truculent-looking man pushed the door all the way open. 'I'm looking for Sam Cragg,' he announced.

'You don't have to go lookin' no more,' Sam replied cheerfully, 'that's me.'

'Good for me,' the large man said. He took a card from his pocket, and glanced at it. 'Three years ago you bought a mandolin from the Ajax Mandolin Company.'

'That's right,' conceded Sam. 'An' I got a beef against that Ajax Mandolin Company. They said a child could learn to

play their music maker in two weeks. Well, I'm smarter than any child and I banged away at that dingus every day for three months and I couldn't get nōthing but noise out of it.'

'The hell with that crap,' the large, truculent man snapped. 'The point is, you paid three dollars down on that mandolin and you were supposed to pay fifty cents a week on it. Only you didn't. So you owe forty-six fifty, plus interest, or a grand total of sixty-seven seventy-five. That's all I want from you, brother, sixty-seven seventy-five.'

Johnny Fletcher exclaimed petulantly, 'For the love of Mike, Sam, can't you entertain your friends a little more quietly? I'm trying to think.'

Sam tossed the wet socks into the bathroom and wiped his hands on his trousers. 'This ain't no friend, Johnny. He's tryin' to collect on that mandolin——'

'What mandolin?'

'The one I bought three years ago, Johnny. You know—we hocked it in Duluth——'

'So!' roared the bill collector, 'you pawned an article that you did not legally own. Mister, that's a penitentiary offence. Yes sir, you certainly made a mistake *that* time!'

Johnny Fletcher sprang to his feet. 'What the hell is this all about?' He stabbed a lean forefinger at the man in the doorway. 'Don't tell me you're a bill collector?'

'That's all I am, brother, just a plain ordinary bill collector. From the Acme Adjustment Agency, A.A.A., that's who. And, *brother*, have I got you fellows over a barrel. You just confessed that you committed a crime. So pay up—or go up!'

Johnny rubbed his hands together. A smile played over his lips, but his eyes gleamed metallically. 'Brother, a bill collector, trying to collect money from Johnny Fletcher. H₁ ha ha!'

'Ha ha to you. Funny, ain't it?'

'No funnier'n a little woolly lamb trying to take away a mean wolf's dinner. *Brother*, as you say, you'd have better luck squeezing milk out of stones than you'll have trying to collect money from Johnny Fletcher.'

The big bill collector leaned against the wall and showed big teeth. 'Well, now, you talk mighty pretty. Johnny Fletcher, huh? Supposed to be somebody, huh? Well, meet J. J. Kilkenny, a meaner man than a barrel of cats by that name. Kilkenny, the Killer, they call me. Just the roughest, toughest bill collector in the business, that's all. When I find them, they pay.'

'Now you're talkin' in my department,' Sam Cragg declared. 'Ckay, Johnny? Or do you want to make some more chitchat first?'

'Oh, let's not be hasty, Sam. The man just made a mistake, that's all. We'll talk to him a little and we'll listen to him a little.'

'The talkin'll be short and the listenin'll be shorter,' said J. J. Kilkenny. 'In fact, it's over.' He straightened, hitched up his trousers belt and took a step forward. 'Sixty-seven seventy-five or the party gets rough.'

He reached out a big hand. Sam took the hand lightly in his own. Kilkenny smiled pleasantly, whisked his hand out of Sam's, grabbed Sam's wrist and stepping quickly around behind Sam, attempted to pull the hand and arm around with him, to clamp on a hammerlock. That was what he intended to do. But Sam's hand and arm didn't follow Kilkenny. Instead, Sam stiffened his arm, gave a slight forward jerk and broke Kilkenny's hold. Then he turned, grabbed two handfuls of Kilkenny's coat and shook the big bill collector.

Kilkenny's hands flailed out, found Sam's head. Muscular arms went around Sam and tightened in a headlock. Sam turned easily in the headlock, reached over his left shoulder with both hands and, catching hold of Kilkenny's head, stooped suddenly.

Kilkenny sailed smoothly over Sam's shoulders and hit the floor on his back, with a crash that probably broke a few electric light bulbs in the room below.

When Kilkenny climbed shakily to his feet, Sam was leaning easily against the wall. 'You want to make it two falls out of three?'

Kilkenny shook his head groggily. 'Let me think it over a minute. You're a ten-dollar skip. That's okay, I can exert myself for ten bucks. On the other hand, I might tear my suit throwing you and it might cost ten bucks to get it sewed up. There wouldn't be any profit left, would there?'

'There wouldn't,' interposed Johnny. 'And there might even be a loss, if you had to have a doctor patch up a broken leg or two.'

'No chance of that. I can throw him, all right. That snap mare was just luck, because I wasn't expectin' it.'

'I've got news for you,' said Johnny. 'Sam can throw you all day long. And two more guys like you. Sure, you're big and tough. But not tough enough for Sam. He's the strongest man in the world.'

'Huh?'

'Sam Cragg, alias Young Samson, the strongest man in the world. He breaks iron chains merely by expanding his chest. If we had a chain here, Sam would tie it around his chest and when I'd give him the word he'd draw a deep breath and slowly let it out and his chest would swell and swell until the chain would snap as if it were mere twine. And me, if I had any copies of *Every Man a Samson*, I'd be passing 'em out to the crowd and collecting two dollars and ninety-five cents for each and every copy.'

Johnny paused, sighed heavily. 'That's what we'd do if we had a chain and if we had any books. But we ain't got a chain and we ain't got any books. That's why we're holed up at the Forty-Fifth Street Hotel until I can figure out an angle for

making some dough, without any investment. And then you—a bill collector—come in here and try to collect money from us!’

The bill collector nodded thoughtfully. ‘So you’re broke. That’s fine. You can’t count it against me if the customer really ain’t got the dough.’

‘No,’ said Johnny, ‘but even if we had the money you couldn’t get it from us. You’re not a good enough man.’

‘The hell I ain’t. If you had the money I’d get it out of you.’

‘Uh-uh,’ said Johnny cheerfully. ‘Even if Sam wasn’t here you wouldn’t get the money. I’d talk you out of it. Oh, I suppose you’re all right as bill collectors go, but no bill collector could out-talk Johnny Fletcher.’

Kilkenny glowered at Johnny. ‘You think you’re pretty good? You could take a bunch of cards like this every Monday morning—ten-dollar skips, brother, not the easy five-dollar ones—you could take ten-twelve cards like this every Monday, run down the skips and get the money, huh?’

‘I most certainly could.’

‘Talk’s cheap.’

‘All right,’ said Johnny. ‘Look over your cards, pick one out at random, or pick one you’ve failed to locate. Give it to me and by this time tomorrow I’ll have the money.’

‘For how much?’

‘For ten bucks. How’s that?’

‘Brother,’ said Kilkenny, ‘you’ve just got yourself a little bet.’ He skimmed quickly through his little bunch of cards extracted one. ‘Here’s a nice little number. ‘Alice Cummings, Chesterton Hotel.’ She bought a fur coat from the Arctic Fur Company for sixty-nine ninety-five. She paid two dollars a week for twelve weeks, then skipped, owing forty-nine ninety-five. That was four years ago, come next November, so there’s a little matter of thirty-four dollars interest, call it seventy-four dollars. You have the money here tomorrow at this time and

you with yourself a nice ten-dollar bill. Fail and you pay me ten bucks—and I'm bringing the brass knucks with me, to collect. How's that?"

'You got yourself a little deal, mister,' said Johnny.

'You're the witness,' Kilkenny said to Sam Cragg. 'And no hard feelings, huh?'

'Practise some holds,' Sam said, 'maybe we can go another fall tomorrow, huh?'

Kilkenny scowled and went out. But the door did not close. Mr. Peabody, the manager of the Forty-Fifth Street Hotel, pushed it open.

'See here, Mr. Fletcher!' he bleated. 'I've just had a complaint from the occupants of the room below this one. What are you doing up here, jumping exercises? You knocked the plaster off the ceiling down below.'

Johnny made a vague gesture of dismissal. 'Not now, Peabody, not now.'

'What do you mean, not now?' demanded the hotel manager. Then he saw the wet socks on the bathroom floor. An expression of horror came over his face. 'Washing again! How many times have I told you that we do not permit guests to wash their clothing in the bathrooms?'

'Oh, go 'way,' cried Johnny. 'Can't you see I'm trying to think? You're bothering me.'

'Very well,' said Mr. Peabody sternly. 'Think about paying your bill. Your three weeks are up tomorrow. You know the rules—three weeks' credit and out you go. So, think, think how you're going to get the thirty-six dollars you will owe me tomorrow.'

'That's what I'm working on,' said Johnny.

'Ah, so you don't have the money! I thought so. Perhaps I shouldn't even wait until tomorrow—'

'You'll get your money, don't worry. You've always gotten it, haven't you?'

'No! I've had to lock you out of this room before.'

'Yeah,' said Sam Cragg, 'but you let us in again.'

'When you paid up. But one of these days I'll lock you out and you'll stay locked out. And that'll be a happy day for me.'

'Peabody,' said Johnny, 'I like you, too. But I've got work to do, so will you go and lock out some other people and let me alone . . .?'

'Until tomorrow,' Peabody said, darkly and went out.

Sam closed the door on the hotel manager. He came back into the room and looked hopefully at Johnny. 'You got an idea yet, Johnny?'

'I think so.'

'Is it about food? A thick steak and French fries, maybe? And a big chunk of apple pie and three cups of coffee?'

'Food? Haven't we eaten today?'

'Uh-uh. No, Johnny. We didn't eat today and we didn't eat last night.'

'We've got to watch that. It isn't good for a man to miss his meals like that.'

'That's what I been telling you, Johnny. I keep telling you all the time, I don't feel good when I don't eat three squares a day. But we ain't got any money. Not even a dime between us.'

'A man doesn't need money to eat. Not when he's really hungry. Come on, let's eat.'

'How? Where? You know Peabody won't let us charge in the hotel dining room.'

Johnny held up the card he had received from the skip tracer. 'The Chesterton Hotel has a nice dining room. Why don't we eat there?'

'Anything you say, Johnny. I'm hungry enough to wash dishes—after I eat.'

Johnny got his coat out of the closet, and the two left the

hotel. They walked to Sixth Avenue, excuse please, Avenue of the Americas, and turned left. On Forty-Eighth Street they turned left again and halfway up the block entered the Chester-ton Hotel, which was slightly larger than the Forty-Fifth Street Hotel, but also slightly dingier.

2

THE Chesterton catered to the same kind of clientele as the Forty-Fifth Street Hotel, race-track touts, chorus girls, would-be actors and actresses and the usual miscellany of Broadway characters and sharp-shooters. Plus a few out-of-town people who came to New York now and then and sought cheap accommodations.

There were eight or ten people in the lobby, but Johnny found a couple of vacant chairs. He sat down in one and gestured to Sam to take the other chair.

'Why don't we go in the dining room and eat?' Sam asked anxiously. 'I'm so hungry I could put salt on these leather chairs and eat them.'

'In a minute, Sam, in a minute. Ah . . .

A bellboy turned away from the desk, glanced at a slip of paper in his hand and called out, 'Paging Mr. Malkin. Mr. Paul Malkin, please.'

Mr. Malkin did not respond and the bellboy entered the adjoining dining room and called out a couple of times, then he returned and delivered the slip to the desk, where it was put into Mr. Malkin's key slot.

'Now let's eat,' said Johnny.

Sam sprang to his feet and they entered the dining room.

They had a nice lunch of soup, salad, New York cut steak, coffee and pie. Then the waiter brought the check. Johnny took the pencil and scribbled on it. Paul Malkin.

'Your room number too, please,' said the waiter.

'Of course.' Johnny wrote down 821, then reached into a

pocket. He fished around for a moment, smiled and shook his head. 'Don't seem to have any change. Here'—He picked up the pencil again and wrote on the check—'Tip, \$1.00.'

'Thank you, sir,' said the waiter. 'I hope you enjoyed your lunch.'

'It was delicious!'

'You said it,' exclaimed Sam, smacking his lips.

As they walked out of the dining room, Sam whispered nervously, 'Let's get out of here fast!'

'Why? Mr. Malkin's out of the hotel at the moment. And he isn't a regular here, or the bellboy wouldn't have had to page him. He'd have known him by sight. Relax, we've had a nice lunch, so now we get to work.'

He took the skip tracer's card from his pocket. 'Miss Alice Cummings. Nice name. Well, let's see.'

He stepped up to the desk and accosted the clerk. 'I'm from the Hotel Credit Bureau,' he said. 'I want to ask you about a guest who stayed here, mm, four years ago.'

'That's a long time ago,' said the clerk. 'What's the name?'

'Miss Alice Cummings.'

A gleam came into the clerk's eyes, but he shook his head. 'I don't remember her, but I'll see . . .' He went to the rear of his compartment and took down a ledger. Blowing dust off it, he returned and opened it on the desk.

'Alice Cummings, eh? Let's see, now.' He ran his finger down a page. 'Ah, yes, Room seven fifteen. She lived here quite awhile. Ah-hah, I thought so. The name did seem a little familiar—'

'You knew her personally?' Johnny asked.

'Vaguely. A blonde, I believe. Or possibly a brunette.

'Or maybe even a redhead?'

'Could be. What hotel has she swindled now?'

'She owed money here?'

'Forty-six dollars, it says here.'

'At how much a week?'

'Oh, her room was only ten dollars, but she ran up six dollars' worth of extras.'

'You mean you let her stay four weeks without getting any money from her?'

'That's what it looks like. Of course, I don't remember the details now. In fact, I scarcely remember the young lady.'

'You know she was young.'

'All our female guests are young. Ha ha!'

'But Miss Cummings *was* young?'

'I seem to recall that, yes. I scarcely remember her, but I do somehow recall that she was, yes, quite young. In her early twenties. Some people might even call her attractive.'

'She didn't leave a forwarding address?'

'Don't be ridic. I just told you she skipped without paying her bill.'

'How long had she stayed here altogether?'

'Oh, quite a while. Four, no, almost five months. She paid for a while, then began to fall behind. She paid up, then finally got into us for forty-six, and that's the last we saw of her.'

'You held her luggage?'

'What luggage?'

'Trunks—bags?'

The clerk grimaced. 'A trunk worth two dollars. Full of newspapers.'

'What about her fur coat?'

'Fur coat? What—how do you know she had a fur coat?'

'It says so here on this card. She bought a fur coat from the Arctic Fur Company, on which she still owes a little tab of seventy-four dollars.'

The old clerk looked sharply at Johnny. 'How would you know that? You said you were with the Hotel Credit Bureau.'

'Me? Naw, what I said was that you were probably a member of the Hotel Credit Bureau. Me, I'm just a little old skip tracer.'

'A skip tracer! You've got a nerve trying to pump me for information.'

'Ain't I, though?' chuckled Johnny. He winked at the clerk and strode away.

Sam trotted beside him. 'This is fun,' Johnny said.

'Fun?' exclaimed Sam. 'I couldn't hardly eat I was so nervous.' He looked nervously over his shoulder. 'Let's get out of here.'

'Just a minute.'

Johnny accosted a bellboy near the door. 'Nice hotel you've got here, laddie.'

'What's nice about it?' asked the bellboy sourly.

'Been working here long?'

'Just a few months. Why?'

'I'm making a survey on how long hotel employees keep their jobs. Who, besides the clerk, for instance, do you know that's been here for, say, four years or more?'

'The doorman. He's got a sweet racket and he can take the guff.'

'Thank you, laddie. He's the man I want to talk to.'

The doorman stood outside the hotel, sneaking a quiet smoke. He would take a quick puff or two, then palm the cigarette as he held it behind his back.

Johnny stepped up to him. 'Mister,' he said, 'I've come to New York from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, to find my sister who ran away from home five years ago, come Candlemas Day.'

'I'll bet,' said the doorman cynically.

'Her name,' Johnny went on, 'was Alice Cummings and this was the last address we had of her.'

'Alice Cummings,' mused the doorman. 'Yeah, sure, I remember her. A good-looking babe—'

'Naturally. You wouldn't have remembered her if she hadn't been.'

'Oh, I remember her, all right. She had a little hard luck, I

hear, and couldn't pay her room rent. Although you'd have never known it.'

'Poor Alice,' sighed Johnny. 'Alone in the great city, no money, only a cheap mink-dyed alley-cat fur coat to keep her warm.'

'She was wearing a real mink the last time I saw her,' retorted the doorman.

'When was that?'

'The last time? Only a month ago.'

'You've seen her more than this once?'

'Oh, sure. Standing out here, you're bound to see everyone you ever knew. I see this babe two-three-four times a year. Doin' all right, too, I guess. She was with young Carmichael six-eight months ago. Come out of the theatre there and it was rainin' so cabs was scarce and they came over here to grab one. I helped her in.'

'Carmichael,' said Johnny, 'that wouldn't be Billy Carmichael, would it?'

'Naw. Young Jess—you know, son of old Jess Carmichael who made a potful in the grocery business.'

'Oh, him. Well, well! Sis is doing all right. Thanks a million.'

'Not a million. A buck'd be all right.'

'If I had a buck, which I haven't,' retorted Johnny, 'I'd invest it in the Carmichael Grocery Stores.'

'Yah!' said the doorman disgustedly.

'Yah to you.'

Johnny signalled to Sam and they walked toward Seventh Avenue. 'I'm glad to know the kid ain't starvin',' Sam said. 'Wouldn't it be swell if she'd marry a fellow like this rich Mr. Carmichael?'

'It would help to distribute the wealth,' said Johnny, 'but it seems to me I've seen this Carmichael lad's name in the gossip columns. He gets around. Mm, let's take a little walk to settle our lunch.'

At Forty-Eighth they turned right and walked to Fifty-Second, then cut across to Fifth Avenue. Just beyond was the Beau Jester Club where you could get a nice hamburger steak luncheon for two for around \$18.50.

The velvet rope was up at the door. 'Sorry, sir,' a headwaiter told Johnny, 'we won't have any tables until around three o'clock.'

'Jess Carmichael said he'd meet us here today for lunch.'

'Mr. Carmichael? There must be some mistake. He never eats here on Tuesdays.'

'This is the Beau Jester Club, isn't it?'

'Of course, sir, but on Tuesdays Mr. Carmichael always has lunch at the Harover Club.'

'He must have meant me to come over to the Harover Club, then. Let's see, that's on Thirty-Eighth, isn't it?'

'Oh, no, Forty-Sixth, just east of Fifth Avenue.'

'Well, thank you.'

They walked back to Fifth Avenue and turned south. A few minutes later they entered the grimy building that had housed the Harover Club since the turn of the century.

Inside, an assistant doorman who kept the record of the club members who were in the building at the time faced them. 'Yes, gentlemen?'

'Mr. Jess Carmichael. He's expecting us.'

'Your names?'

'Fletcher and Cragg. But it's all right, we're having lunch with him. We'll look for him in the dining room.'

'Sorry, sir, but it's against the club rules. Mr. Carmichael will have to pass you. I'll have him paged for you.' He scribbled on a pad, banged a bell and called out, 'Front!'

A bellboy came forward smartly and the attendant handed him a slip of paper. 'Page Mr. Carmichael.'

The bellboy went off and was gone a good five minutes, while Johnny and Sam waited in front of the assistant door-

man's desk. Finally, the boy came back, accompanied by a red-faced, dissipated-looking man of about thirty. The bellboy indicated Johnny and Sam, and Jess Carmichael regarded them vaguely.

'Do I know you chaps?'

'Not yet,' said Johnny. 'My name's Fletcher and this is my partner, Sam Cragg.'

Carmichael nodded briefly. He did not offer to shake hands.

'If you are selling insurance——'

'We're not,' said Johnny. 'In fact, we're not selling a thing. I came to see you for one reason only. To tell you how grateful I am.'

'For what?' asked Carmichael, still suspicious.

'My sister. You've been awfully good to her.'

Carmichael winced. 'Fletcher, you said? Uh, I, ah, don't believe I know——'

'Oh, she doesn't use our name any more. When she ran away from home she changed it.' Johnny paused for effect. 'To Alice Cummings.'

And now Carmichael really winced. 'Uh, ah, Alice, uh, Cummings.'

'No, no, just Alice Cummings. Not uh, ah, or mm. She's told you about me, hasn't she?'

'No!' exploded young Carmichael. 'She never mentioned a brother. And I don't believe you are her brother.'

Johnny made a clicking sound with his tongue. He appealed to Sam. 'Tell the man, Sam, am I, or am I not, little Alice's brother?'

'Yeah, sure,' said Sam. 'She's our sister—I mean, *your* sister . . .'

'Blackmail!' exclaimed Carmichael. 'You're trying to blackmail me.'

'I've got nothing against blackmail,' Johnny said. 'A man

does something he hadn't ought to do, he ought to pay for it. Shall we talk about it?"

"H-how much?" gulped Carmichael.

"Shall we go in and talk about it?"

"No! Tell me how much, that's all I want to know."

"I'll make a deal with you. A better deal than you deserve. I'll let you go your crummy way, on just one little condition. Alice's address. Right now—fast."

"That's all you want? You're sure?"

"That's all. Nothing more. Absolutely."

"Chateau Pelham—Fifth Avenue."

"Mr. Carmichael," Johnny said, "you're a scholar and a gentleman. I thank you."

He started to turn away. A shudder ran through Jess Carmichael and he suddenly reached out and grabbed Johnny's arm. "I—I don't get it."

"You will," said Johnny and walked out of the club.

Outside, Sam Cragg let out a roar. "Holy smoke, Johnny. That was raw!"

"I didn't do a thing. I didn't say anything I couldn't repeat in a court. It's his conscience. He read a different meaning into everything. That's what a guilty conscience does to a man."

"Where we going now?"

"The Chateau Pelham, where else? And I hope she's in. I'm getting tired of walking. We'll ride back."



3

JOHNNY said to the switchboard operator in the Chateau Pelham, 'Tell her Mr. Carmichael sent me.'

The operator repeated the information into the phone, then nodded to Johnny. 'Four-D.'

They rode up in the automatic elevator to the fourth floor. Four doors opened on to the corridor, one for each of the apartments on the floor. Johnny pressed the door buzzer of Four-D.

The door was opened by Alice Cummings, and Johnny knew why the hotel clerk at the Hotel Chesterton still remembered her. She was that kind of a girl. Blonde, tall. Her figure, however wasn't much. Too much like Marilyn Monroe's.

'Do I know you boys?' she asked in a voice that soothed, like molten lava. Behind Johnny, Sam Cragg whistled softly.

'We just left Jess at the club,' Johnny said.

'Sober?' Without waiting for a reply, she opened the door and Johnny and Sam went into the apartment.

It was nice. It was worth around two hundred a month and probably cost three fifty.

'Can I get you a drink?' cooed Alice Cummings.

'To cut a long story short,' Johnny said, 'four years ago you bought a fur coat from the Arctic Fur Company . . .'

The love and kisses faded from Alice's face. 'What?' she cried shrilly.

'Seventy-four dollars. That's what you owe. You can give it to me in small bills.'

'Why, you lousy—' began Alice Cummings. Then she caught herself. 'What is this, a gag?'

'The Acme Adjustment Agency does not jest, madam,' said Johnny severely. 'I'm a skip tracer. You skipped with the pelts and I skip-traced you. This is payday for A.A.A. Seventy-four dollars, lady. Cash. Cheques not accepted.'

'Ha, ha,' said Alice humourlessly. 'I laughed. The gag's a howl. Now scram, boys, I've got a date.'

'With the cops,' said Johnny. 'You skipped with the coat and that's against the law.'

'It sure is, lady,' chimed in Sam Cragg. 'When you buy a mandolin you got to pay for it. You ain't allowed to hock it in Duluth.'

Alice Cummings whipped open the door. 'Out, bums!'

Johnny put his hand against the door and pushed it shut. 'The money—or the coat.'

'What coat? That rabbitskin wore out ages ago. I paid more for that junk than it was worth.'

'The Acme Adjustment Agency says uh-uh. And when Acme Adjustment says uh-uh, it means uh-uh. We're blood-hounds. We get the money from you or it gives blood. I mean it, sister. Seventy-four dollars on the line or I'll blow the whistle.'

'I haven't got seventy-four dollars. And even if I had it I wouldn't—'

'Yes, you would. And it's still seventy-four dollars.'

'Now, wait a minute,' the girl said, suddenly desperate. 'You gave the name of Jess Carmichael so you'd get in. How—how did you know about him?'

'We saw him, lady,' cried Sam. 'We talked to him at the Harover Club. He thought we was tryin' to—'

'Shut up, Sam,' exclaimed Johnny. 'But he's right, baby, it was old Jess himself who gave us your address.'

'Jess,' whispered Alice. 'So it's come to this.'

'Seventy-four,' said Johnny remorselessly.

She suddenly whirled and strode into the bedroom. She came

out immediately, carrying a purse. 'All right,' she said angrily, "take your money. And I hope you choke on it!"

She tore open the bag, brought out a wallet and skimmed out a sheaf of bills, all that were in the wallet. Johnny counted the money. He shook his head.

'There's only fifty-seven dollars here, madam. Seventeen short.'

'That's all the money I've got in the place. I'll send you a check for the balance.'

'You weren't listening, lady. I said no cheques.'

'Come back tomorrow, then!'

The phone whirled and Alice scooped it up. 'Yes?' She listened a moment, then her face showed sudden fright. 'Mr. Carmichael. Y-yes, tell him to come up.'

She slammed down the receiver. 'Get out of here. Right away.'

'Seventeen dollars, baby . . .'

'I told you I haven't got the money.'

'Maybe Mr. Carmichael can lend it to you.'

'No!' she cried. 'He mustn't see you here. Go—*now* . . .!'

In panic she whirled and looked wildly around the room. Her eyes focused on what looked like a table decoration, a bronze figure of a swan or goose, about four inches tall. She rushed to the table, scooped it up and came back. 'Here, take this. It's got more than seventeen dollars in it. Take it and get out.'

Johnny took the statue and shook it. There was a slot on the back of the figure's neck in which coins could be inserted. The figure was heavy and Johnny heard the cheerful clink of coins inside.

'A piggy bank,' he said.

'A goose bank!' exclaimed Sam.

'Get out now—please . . .' Alice started to push Johnny toward the door.

'All right,' he said. 'I can take a hint.'

He opened the door and stepped out. Sam crowded his heels. In the corridor, Johnny pushed the button for the elevator.

'Jeez,' said Sam. 'I feel sorry for the babe.'

'Don't. She's tough.'

The elevator door opened, and Jess Carmichael stepped out. Johnny stepped in. Carmichael whirled.

'Here, you! What are you . . .?'

'Good-bye, now,' said Johnny, pushing the 'down' button. The door swung shut in Carmichael's face.

Sam said, 'A guy shouldn't be that rough to any babe.'

'Necessity,' Johnny said. 'Remember our three weeks are up tomorrow. You know Peabody'll throw us out on the street. And remember, you're feeling differently now since you've had a big fat lunch. Think back how hungry you were.'

'I can eat again.'

They reached the lobby and stepped out of the elevator. The switchboard operator regarded them suspiciously and followed them out with her eyes.

4

WHEN they reached their room at the Forty-Fifth Street Hotel, Johnny took off his coat and sat down on the bed. He upended the bronze goose bank and shook it. Nothing happened and he examined the slot by which the coins were put into the bank.

'Looks like they made this one-way,' he observed. 'But if the money went in, it's got to come out.'

'I used to be pretty good with a piggy bank when I was a kid,' said Sam Cragg.

'So was I, but I'm out of practice.' Johnny shook the bank mightily and a coin fell to the bedspread. He picked it up. 'An Indian head penny!'

'Hey, I ain't seen one of those in a long time,' exclaimed Sam.

'Nineteen hundred and seven,' said Johnny, looking at the date on the coin. 'I thought maybe it might be rare, but I guess this isn't old enough.' He shook the bank for another moment or two and a dime fell out. A 1912 Barber head dime.

'Her grandnother must have saved these coins,' said Johnny. He continued shaking the bank and a third coin fell out. This, too, was a penny, dated 1902.

'Why'd they have to make this thing out of bronze?' complained Johnny. 'It's going to be more trouble than it's worth to get all the money out.'

'I can flatten it,' offered Sam.

'That might make the slot even narrower,' Johnny sighed. 'I guess the hard way's the only way with these banks.'

'I'm hungry again,' complained Sam. 'All that walking.'

Johnny picked up a five-dollar bill from the money given to him by Alice Cummings. 'Here, go and get yourself another steak. You need it—you haven't been eating regularly lately.'

'Aren't you coming along?'

'No, I've had enough to eat for a while. I'll keep at this.'

Sam hesitated, but his stomach won. 'I'll be back in an hour,' he said and went out.

Johnny continued with the bank and extracted another dime and a penny, in the next few minutes. Both were fairly old coins, although not worn much.

He got up to stretch a moment and then the door was opened and Mr. Kilkenny, the skip tracer, entered. He was grinning wickedly.

'Don't you knock?' Johnny asked angrily.

'A skip tracer never knocks,' Kilkenny said cheerfully. 'Nobody loves a skip tracer and nobody lets him in anywhere, if they can keep him out.' His eyes went to the roll of bills on the bed. 'Well, well, Fletcher, you made a score, I see. Not from Miss Alice Cummings, though?'

'Why not? I said I'd find her and collect, and I did.'

'Great,' enthused Kilkenny. 'I got to hand it to you. I wasn't going to drop by until tomorrow, but I happened to be across the street and saw your partner going by. The big moose!'

'He'll be back in a minute,' Johnny said uneasily.

'Sure, but let's finish our business first. Seventy-four dollars, eh?'

He reached past Johnny and stooped up the bills. He flipped through them quickly. 'Hey, there's only fifty-two dollars here.'

'She didn't have enough.'

'Well, fifty-two is close enough. You got to knock off a little once in a while.'

'True,' said Johnny, 'and, like you said earlier, It don't

really count if the client hasn't got the money. But this one did have most of it and I collected. So you owe me ten dollars.'

'Mm,' said Kilkenny. He pursed up his lips. 'Okay, you won the bet. I'll give you ten credit——'

'Credit?'

'Sure, on the bill you owe.'

'Now, wait a minute,' said Johnny angrily. 'I don't owe you any money.'

'Your partner does. Same thing. You helped spend the money, I'll bet, when you hocked the mandolin.'

'You're not going to get away with this,' snapped Johnny. 'I worked hard to collect that bill and I want my money.'

'Try and get it,' said Kilkenny nastily. 'Talk me out of it. You said you could out-talk me. Go ahead. I'm listening.'

Johnny advanced upon the skip tracer. 'There's a time for talking and a time for——'

'For action?' cried Kilkenny and slammed Johnny a savage blow with his fist. The punch caught Johnny on the cheekbone and knocked him backward over the bed.

Kilkenny stood over him. 'Too bad the gorilla ain't here. You want more?'

Johnny hesitated. The big man outweighed him by at least forty pounds. He was too much for Johnny. He said, 'Stick around until Sam comes back.'

'It ain't worth it,' sneered Kilkenny. 'But you'll be seeing me again. As soon as you get some more dough . . .'

He went out, slamming the door.

Johnny touched his cheek, found that it was already swelling and went into the bathroom. He doused cold water over his face, soaked a towel and, holding it against his face, returned to the bed. He picked up the bank and began to shake it with renewed zest. He would need these pennies and dimes and quarters now.

5

WHEN Sam Cragg returned, Johnny was just getting the last coin out of the goose bank. A penny.

'I think we got gypped,' he said. 'There isn't seventeen dollars here.'

'It's all pennies and dimes and quarters.'

'And most of them old ones.' Johnny scooped up the heap of dimes and quarters. 'Here, count these.'

While Sam was counting the dimes and quarters, Johnny himself counted the pennies. After a few moments he said, 'I make it ninety-eight pennies . . .'

'And twenty-four dimes and twelve quarters,' said Sam.

'Two forty, plus ninety-eight cents, plus three dollars—six dollars and thirty-eight cents.'

'The bank ought to be worth something,' suggested Sam.

'Sure, about forty cents.' Johnny picked up the goose bank. It was quite heavy. He studied it a moment. 'Nice-looking bird,' he said, 'but one of the feet is smaller than the other.'

'Do you suppose that means something?'

Johnny shrugged. 'It looks more like an imperfection in the casting. These things were made to retail for about forty-nine cents.'

Sam took the goose from Johnny's hand and set it on the dresser. It was somewhat wobbly on its feet and Sam wiggled it back and forth. 'Look, it limps.'

Johnny tried the goose bank himself. 'A limping goose. He studied the bank closely, finally took a nail file from his pocket and scratched at the bronze. He finally shook his head.

'It's bronze, all right. I hoped for a minute that it might turn out to be gold.'

'That'd been something.' Sam's eyes went to the two heaps of coins on the bed. 'What about those dimes and pennies? They're pretty old-fashioned. You said something about you thought they might be rare.'

'I don't know enough about coins,' Johnny said. 'I wish I did. It won't hurt to find out, but I have a feeling that all of these are too new. The oldest one's only about eighteen sixty.' He was thoughtful for a moment. 'I remember seeing a book on rare coins down at the Times Square news stand. It sold for about a dollar. I wish I had a dollar.'

'You've got a dollar,' reminded Sam.

'I haven't,' Johnny corrected, turning his face squarely to Sam for the first time since the latter had entered the room.

Sam exclaimed, 'What happened? You bumped yourself?'

'Yes, I bumped myself. Against Mr. Kilkenny's fist. He was here right after you left——'

'He bopped you?' cried Sam. 'Why, I'll tear the guy to pieces.'

'If he comes back.' Johnny exhaled heavily. 'He took the money—fifty-two dollars . . .'

'What about the ten he promised if you collected the bill?'

Johnny shook his head. 'He's applying it on the mandolin bill.'

'Why, the dirty . . .' swore Sam.

'You said it. So we're broke again. Except for these pennies and dimes and quarters and . . .' Johnny's eyes lit up. 'How much have you got left from that fiver I gave you?'

Sam winced. 'I was pretty hungry.'

'You had a big lunch. How much . . .' Johnny held out his hand.

Abashed, Sam brought out a crumpled dollar bill and some loose change. 'A dollar forty-five.'

Johnny groaned. 'You ate three dollars and fifty-five cents' worth of food on top of what you had for lunch!'

'The bill was only three five, but I left a half-buck tip.'

Johnny howled. 'We're about to be thrown out of our hotel room and you go leaving fifty-cent tips.'

'Well, you gave the fellow at the Chesterton Hotel a buck.'

'I didn't give him anything,' cried Johnny. 'I just wrote it on the check. You don't think Malkin, or whatever the guy's name is, is going to pay that, do you?'

'How was I to know?' Sam growled defensively. 'I'm always about six laps behind you on these stunts of yours. Anyway, we got a dollar forty-five and these dimes and pennies and quarters.'

'That's not enough to keep Peabody from throwing us out on the street. And I don't know about these pennies. They might be more valuable than I think. I'd hate to give them to Peabody and then find out they were worth about ten thousand dollars.'

'Ten thousand?' cried Sam. 'You think they might . . .?'

'I'm going to find out. And right now's as good a time as any. Come on.'

He put on his coat and they left the hotel. They crossed to Fifth Avenue, then turned south to Forty-Second, where they entered the huge New York Public Library.

In the card-file room, Johnny looked up books on rare coins and a few minutes later a book was presented to him in the big reading room. With Sam trailing, he carried it to one of the tables and rapidly turned the pages to Indian head pennies.

'Ha!' he exclaimed. 'Eighteen fifty-six, Flying Eagle cent, worth one hundred dollars and up—'

'Jeez!' cried Sam. 'We got one of those?'

'No, our oldest coin is eighteen sixty, I believe. We'll look those up in a minute. Here—eighteen sixty-one, cent, worth fifty cents to a dollar . . '

'That's all right.'

'Not bad, but say, look at this—eighteen sixty-four, up to thirty dollars.'

'For a penny?'

'That's what the book says. And here's another, eighteen seventy-one, and here's the best of all, eighteen seventy-seven, up to fifty dollars.'

'Wow!' cried Sam.

Across the table an elderly man put his forefinger to his lips and whispered sibilantly, 'Shhh!'

Johnny skimmed over a few pages. 'Here's the dimes. Mmm, they seem to run about the same, maybe a little less even. Oh-oh, here's an exception, eighteen ninety-four-O—up to twenty-four hundred dollars.'

'We got one of those, Johnny?'

'I don't know. I hardly think so. It says here that only twenty-four were made.'

'Take a look, I'm all goose pimples,' Sam blinked, then chuckled. 'Goose pimples—from a goose bank.'

Across the table the elderly reader exploded. 'Please, it is forbidden to talk in the library. Shut up, please!'

'Okay,' said Sam loudly.

'Here,' said Johnny, 'we'll copy all this down about the dimes and the pennies. You got a pencil?'

'You know I never carry one. I haven't got anybody to write to.'

Johnny looked across the table. 'Excuse me, but do you have a pencil I could borrow?'

'If it'll keep you quiet, here's a fountain pen,' exclaimed the elderly reader.

'Thank you. You don't happen to have a couple of sheets of paper on you, do you?'

The reader groaned. 'Here—here's a notebook, tear out some pages. Now, write please, and keep quiet a while.'

Johnny scribbled furiously for fifteen or twenty minutes,

then returned the fountain pen and gathered up his sheets. 'This'll do it. Good-bye, sir, and thank you for the use of the pen and the paper . . .'

Two chairs away, a heavy-set man with thick glasses slammed back his chair. 'There's too damn much noise around here!'

Johnny put his finger to his lips. 'Shhh! It's against the rules to yell in the library.'

He chuckled and started out of the reading room. Sam followed.

They walked down Forty-Second Street and started to cross the street. Passing the news stand, Johnny's eyes went to the papers. A headline caught his eye and he whirled back. A groan was forced from him.

'What is it?' Sam asked.

Johnny folded the paper and handed the news vendor a nickel. He crossed the street. Then he opened the paper and exposed the headline to Sam.

It read:

PLAYBOY FOUND DEAD IN LOVE NEST
JESS CARMICHAEL III FOUND SLAIN IN
FIFTH AVENUE APARTMENT
OF BROADWAY SHOWGIRL

'Holy cow!' gasped Sam Cragg. 'That's the joint we were at this afternoon.'

Johnny continued to read the article. His breathing became heavier as he went on. Finally he lowered the paper. 'Something tells me that we're going to be in trouble.'

'We didn't do it,' cried Sam.

'We know we didn't, but will the police know? Look, it says here. "The beautiful former showgirl gave police the names of two men who called on her a short time previously and threatened her with bodily injury." That's us, Sam.'

'I didn't threaten her, with nothing,' complained Sam. 'I

wouldn't hurt a girl.' He scowled. 'You ask me, that babe coulda done the job herself.'

'Don't worry,' said Johnny, 'she's suspect Number One.' He studied the paper again, then read, '“Miss Cummings admitted that she and young Carmichael had a quarrel and that she left the apartment in anger. But Carmichael was alive, she insisted, when she left him. When she returned an hour later, his body was found just within the door leading to the corridor . . .”'

'How was he knocked off?'

'Shot, it says here, but the police didn't find the gun. And they can't find anyone in the building who heard the shot, either.'

Sam groaned. 'Something tells me we're going to get in trouble over this. We went all around town asking for young Carmichael——'

'I know,' Johnny said.

'There's the subway,' Sam said, 'we got those dimes. We can be over in New Jersey in a half-hour.'

'It's no good.'

'All right, I don't like New Jersey, either. But we can take the subway to Yonkers and from there we can head north. Canada's up north, ain't it?'

'If the police want us badly enough, they'll get us in Canada.'

'Johnny,' cried Sam in sudden panic, 'you ain't going to play detective again, are you?'

'Who, me?' asked Johnny innocently.

6

MR. PEABODY was in the lobby of the Forty-Fifth Street Hotel, near the elevators. 'Ah, Mr. Fletcher,' he said, 'and Mr. Cragg, how are you?'

'Lousy,' said Johnny sourly.

'Hey,' said Sam, as they stepped into the elevator, 'how come he's so friendly all of a sudden?'

'Because he's thinking about tomorrow, when he goes to throw us out.'

They reached the eighth floor and crossed to Room 821. Johnny took out his key to unlock the door, but before he could insert the key into the lock, the door was opened from inside and Lieutenant Madigan of Homicide said pleasantly, 'Fletcher, old man, how are you?'

'The cops!' cried Sam.

'Damn that Peabody,' snapped Johnny. 'He let you in, didn't he?'

'How could he keep me out?' Lieutenant Madigan, asked cheerfully. He sized up Sam. 'You lost some weight.'

'I been off my feed.'

'You want to watch that,' Madigan said. 'Well, shall we sit down and talk?'

There were only two chairs in the room, but Madigan made himself comfortable on the edge of the bed. Johnny, going to the big Morris chair by the window, saw that the drawers of the single dresser in the room had been pulled out.

'You been goin' through our things?' he accused.

'Naturally.'

Madigan was a big man, around forty. He was an efficient policeman, thoroughly honest and fair—but he was a policeman. He had known Johnny and Sam for years, but Johnny knew that that acquaintance meant nothing to the detective when he was investigating a case.

Madigan pointed to the folded newspaper in Johnny's hand. 'You've been reading about it, I see.'

'We shoulda grabbed the subway,' Sam said bitterly.

'Miss Cummings told you we'd called on her,' Johnny said bluntly. 'Did she tell you why?'

'Yes, and it wasn't very nice. I'm surprised at you, Fletcher.'

'A buck is a buck,' Johnny said. 'Nobody likes a bill collector, but I needed the money and the lady could afford to pay.'

'What're you talking about?'

'I'm talking about the reason we called on Miss Cummings. You said she told you.'

'She said you tried to blackmail her.'

'Whoa!' cried Johnny. 'Blackmail! That's a dirty word——'

'Murder's a dirtier word. Blackmail sometimes leads to murder.'

'Let's back up about four sentences,' Johnny said. 'I called on the little lady for one reason and for one reason only—to collect a bill she owed for a fur coat she bought four years ago and didn't pay for.'

Lieutenant Madigan looked sceptically at Johnny. 'Johnny Fletcher, a bill collector?'

'Why not?' retorted Johnny. 'Who knows better than a deadbeat how to collect from another deadbeat?'

The homicide lieutenant chuckled. 'You called yourself a deadbeat!'

'I've cut a few corners in my time. I'm levelling with you. You've known me for a long time. We're broke—flat. Peabody's going to throw us out tomorrow. So then this fellow from the A.A.A. came around——'

'A.A.A.?'

'Acme Adjustment Agency.'

'On account of the mandolin,' Sam Cragg cut in. 'They said that a child could play it and—' His eyes went to Johnny's scowling face and he broke off.

'A mandolin that a child could play,' the lieutenant prodded.

'That's beside the point,' Johnny said irritably. 'The point is this skip tracer and I had a—a discussion—'

'After I bounced him with a snap mare,' chimed in Sam.

'One word led to another,' Johnny went on, 'and I made a bet with him. Ten bucks that I could trace and collect any skip he had in his pocket. He handed me this . . .' Johnny brought the A.A.A. card on Alice Cummings from his pocket.

The lieutenant grabbed it from his hand. He studied it thoughtfully for a moment. 'A fur coat for sixty-nine ninety-five. She's got a mink now.'

'But she never paid for the rabbit fur until today.'

'She paid?'

'She paid. That's what I'm telling you. We went up there to collect. She got sore, but I wouldn't go without the dough.'

Madigan snapped a finger at the card. 'This gives her address as the Chesterton Hotel. How'd you know she was at the Fifth Avenue place?'

'I traced her. Like any good skip tracer would. The doorman at the Chesterton said he'd seen her getting into a cab with young Carmichael a while ago. Carmichael was easier to trace than Alice, so I switched over to him. I ran him down at the Harover Club and tricked him into telling me her address.'

'You tricked him?' Madigan pounced on that.

'Fast talk, that's all. So then we called on the little lady. She didn't want to pay and I might have had a tough time collecting, but then the phone rang. It was the desk down in the lobby announcing Carmichael. She couldn't get us out fast

enough—and she paid. We ran into Carmichael as we left the apartment. He was alive.'

Madigan frowned as he tapped the A.A.A. card. 'Your story checks, all right—I mean as far as leaving the apartment just about the time Carmichael went up. About the blackmail stuff, it's your word against Alice Cummings.'

'That card in your fist backs up the bill collecting.'

'Yeah, but it doesn't say that you didn't put the squeeze on her to collect.'

'What squeeze could I put on her?'

'You could threaten to tell Carmichael about her past.'

'There's something to tell?'

'How do I know?' Madigan asked irritably. 'She's a show-girl, she's been around.'

'So has Carmichael the third or fourth. Besides, he wasn't marrying the doll. Or was he?'

'Mmm, the little lady says so. They were engaged.'

'Carmichael's old man know about it?'

Lieutenant Madigan hesitated, then shrugged. 'Mr. Carmichael isn't an easy man to reach. I uh, the deputy commissioner has an appointment to talk to him.'

'I see. You don't carry enough rank to talk to a big man.'

Madigan scowled. 'In the Police Department, we follow protocol.'

'Yeah, sure,' said Johnny.

'What's proto-protocol?' Sam asked.

There was a discreet knock on the door. Johnny strode to the door and whipped it open. Mr. Peabody took a hesitant step into the room, his eyes going to Lieutenant Madigan.

'I was wondering if you, er, ah——'

'No,' said Johnny bluntly

'I wasn't talking to you,' Peabody flared up.

'You were about to ask if I was pinched.'

'Well? Since you're vacating this room tomorrow morning . . .

'Who says we are?'

'I say so,' Mr. Peabody said firmly. 'There's a small matter of the rent.'

'Do you have to bring that up in front of my guest?' Johnny demanded.

Lieutenant Madigan chuckled. 'It's like that again, eh?'

'Isn't it always?' Mr. Peabody asked sarcastically.

Madigan got up and headed for the door. 'Don't leave town, Fletcher. And if you do move, let me know your new address.'

'The New York subway, no doubt,' Peabody declared.

'The Forty-Fifth Street Hotel,' Johnny cried, 'tomorrow and the next day and next week.'

'Good luck,' Madigan said and went out.

Mr. Peabody glared at Johnny. 'Fletcher, you know there's no chance of you raising thirty-six dollars between now and tomorrow. Why don't you give up and——'

'Tomorrow,' Johnny said coldly.

Peabody hesitated, then suddenly shrugged. 'Tomorrow—positively!' He went out.

Johnny closed the door and turned to Sam. The latter's face showed concern. 'We gonna sell these coins, Johnny?'

Johnny whipped the door open, looked out to see if Peabody had really gone, then closed the door. 'No, Sam,' he said. 'We're not selling these coins until we can make a good deal on them.'

'But how're we going to raise thirty-six dollars?'

Johnny's lips pursed up in thought. 'It's about time someone taught Peabody a lesson.'

Sam brightened. 'You got an idea, Johnny? Ain't nothin' I'd like better than to see you put one over on him.'

'Thirty-six dollars,' mused Johnny. He walked up to Sam and took the lapel of his coat between his thumb and forefinger.

'No!' cried Sam. 'You ain't goin' to hock my suit. You did that once and I had to stay in here all day while you——'

'Don't worry, Sam,' Johnny said, 'they wouldn't give me over seven or eight dollars for this suit. But did you ever notice the kind of suits Peabody wears? Real nice material—must cost him a hundred and fifty dollars a suit, maybe two hundred.'

'Yeah, he's quite a dude,' admitted Sam. Then he reacted sharply. 'You ain't thinkin' of—'

'Burglarly? No. You know, I wouldn't really steal—not even from a ghoul like Peabody. But borrowing isn't stealing, is it?'

'Peabody wouldn't lend you the sleeves out of his vest.'

'Oh, I don't think he's that bad. Deep down in his heart, he's a human being. He has compassion for his fellow man and when he is compelled to lock a guest out of his room it is only the exigencies of our modern business system that forces him to do it.'

'What're you talking about, Johnny?'

'Peabody. I'm trying to point out that he would like nothing more than to help us out—if he could. I think it's our duty therefore to help him to help us. In other words, I want you to go down into the lobby and watch Peabody. As long as he stays behind the desk fine, but the moment he comes out and heads for the elevator I want you to grab the house phone and call Peabody's room——'

'What for? He'll still be in the elevator, won't he?'

'He'll be in the elevator, but I won't. I'll be in Peabody's room.'

'You ain't goin' to rob him?'" Sam cried.

'Of course not. I just got through telling you that I'm going to help Peabody help us. He can't do it himself, so I've got to help him—well, never mind, just do what I tell you.'

'But how're you going to get into his room without a key?'

'The passkey, how else?' Johnny drew a key from his pocket and exhibited it. 'I've had this for a long time—just in case . . .'

Sam rubbed his chin with the back of his hand. 'I don't

know what this is all about, but I'll do it. If he heads for the elevator I grab the phone. Is that it?"

'That's it.'

They left the room together and Sam waited for the elevator to take him down to the lobby. Johnny took the stairs, climbing up to the sixteenth floor, where the hotel manager occupied a suite. He stepped cautiously to the door, listened a moment, then knocked discreetly. There was no response and after waiting another moment, Johnny put the passkey into the lock and turned it. He opened the door quickly and entered.

Peabody's suite consisted of two rooms, a sitting room and a bedroom. The rooms were large and nicely furnished, much better than the regular rooms in the hotel.

Johnny sent a quick look around the room and headed for the clothes closet. The hotel manager had at least a half-dozen finely tailored suits in the closet, in addition to several sports jackets and slacks. Johnny ran over the suits and picked out a blue serge with a white pin stripe. It was the newest-looking of the suits, having probably been worn only once or twice.

He grinned crookedly as he moved to the door, but panic whipped through him as the phone suddenly shrilled. He jerked open the hall door and bounded out into the corridor.

Fortunately the stairs were not too far away and he took them quickly down to the eighth floor. On the eighth floor he stopped to catch his breath, then walked casually to the elevators and pushed the 'down' button.

A FEW minutes later he stepped out into the lobby. Sam Cragg, near the house phone, came over briskly.

'He catch you?' Sam asked. 'I hardly got down than he headed for the elevator. Hey'—He noted the suit over Johnny's arm—'where'd you get that?'

'Where do you think? Peabody loaned it to me.'

'How could he when he was downstairs in the lobby while you were up——'

'Never mind, Sam, I'll draw you a picture of it.'

Outside, they walked briskly to Eighth Avenue. They passed Uncle Ben's Loan Shop, but went on to Uncle Charlie's Friendly Loans.

Uncle Charlie was a redheaded man with ulcers, which is an occupational disease with pawnbrokers. He regarded Johnny and Sam sourly.

'Uncle Charlie,' Johnny said brightly, 'it's certainly a pleasure to see you again.'

'The pleasure's all yours,' Uncle Charlie retorted.

'I just passed Uncle Ben's place,' Johnny went on unheeding. 'Sam wanted me to go in, but I said no, Uncle Charlie's been awfully good to us in the past and it's up to us to repay him——'

'Mister,' interrupted Uncle Charlie, 'I remember you now. Do me a favour, will you?'

'That's why I'm here.'

'All right, go to Uncle Ben, will you?'

'Why, Uncle Charlie!' exclaimed Johnny. 'I just got through telling you, I owe you a favour——'

'All right, all right,' howled Uncle Charlie. 'That's what I'm telling you—go to Uncle Ben. Do me that favour. I got ulcers—'

'So has Uncle Ben.' Johnny held up Mr. Peabody's blue pin-striped suit. 'Brand-new, never been worn. Real English wool, styled and tailored by Quintino and you know what that means—the best!'

'A suit's a suit,' groaned Uncle Charlie. 'I'm telling you, my ulcers are acting up. I ain't in the mood. If it was hemstitched in gold thread and there was purple lining mixed with Egyptian cobwebs, I couldn't go over fif—'

'Not fifty!' cried Johnny. 'I couldn't possibly let you have it for less than seventy-five!'

'Fifty, who said fifty? Fifteen dollars, and not a nickel more.'

'Sixty bucks and you got yourself a deal,' cut in Sam.

Johnny gave Sam an anguished look. 'Sam, please stay out of this, will you? Uncle Charlie and I understand each other. We know the value of merchandise.'

'I ain't feeling good,' moaned Uncle Charlie. 'I told you I wasn't up to this. But now that we've started, all right, all right, take twenty dollars.'

'Forty-seven fifty,' said Johnny. 'And Quintino will hate me for it. Two hundred and twenty-five dollars he's charging for such a suit now. If he heard that I was thinking of letting this brand-new suit go for forty-seven . . .'

'Brand-new in a pig's eye,' snorted Uncle Charlie. 'That suit's two years old.'

'I just took it out of the box. Here—feel. The nap isn't even lying down yet . . .'

Uncle Charlie took the lapel of the suit between his thumb and forefinger. He squeezed it, rubbed it and then caressed it. 'Six months it's been worn. Twenty-five, mister!'

'I hear you,' Johnny said. 'Not good, but I hear you. Forty-five and it's a loan, that's all. Not an outright sale.'

'I should hope so. I couldn't sell this suit nohow. Twenty-seven fifty. I'll make out the ticket.'

'Make it out for forty.'

'My last offer. Take it or leave it. Twenty-nine seventy-five.'

'Look, Uncle Charlie,' Johnny said, giving it everything, 'I've done business with you in the past. You've made money off me—a lot of money. I don't mind that. A man's got to live. That's my motto, live and let live. It's a good motto, too, but some people don't think so. The manager of our hotel for instance. We owe him a measly little thirty-six dollars—'

'No, no, not thirty-six dollars. I couldn't make it. You'd let me keep the suit and I'd be stuck.'

'My personal guarantee. Three days, that's all you'll keep it. You'll have your money back in three days.'

'Yah! I hear that a hundred times a day.'

'Look,' said Johnny. 'You had my friend's suit here a while ago. One day. A single day, that's all. I hardly got the money out of here, than I was back with it—with interest. I've got a cheque coming in the mail tomorrow . . .'

'Thirty-two dollars, positively and finally. Thirty-two dollars, no more, no less.'

'Thirty-six,' said Johnny. 'Not a penny less.'

'Good-bye. Go to Uncle Ben's. He wouldn't give you over twenty-two fifty. I'm an easy mark, that's why you come to me. Thirty-two dollars, that's all. Positively and final. Good-bye.'

'All right, Uncle Charlie, if it's come to this . . . good-bye.'

Johnny started for the door. Sam, startled, had to jump to keep up with him.

Johnny got the door open, was stepping through reluctantly when Uncle Charlie called out, 'Thirty-four dollars.'

Johnny turned back. 'All right, Uncle Charlie, you've got yourself a deal. Make out the ticket. Thirty-six dollars.'

'I said thirty-four.'

'Thirty-six. You called me back. I need thirty-six and thirty-six it's got to be. T-h-i-r-t-y s-i-x. . . .'

Uncle Charlie clapped his hand to his forehead, and began writing out the ticket. 'The name, please.'

'Why, you remember me,' Johnny said, 'uh, James T. Madigan—'

'Madigan?' Uncle Charlie turned out the inside breast pocket. 'It says here Wilbur Peabody.'

'My stage name. All right, use that name. Most everyone knows me by it, anyway. Yeah, put down Wilbur Peabody, Forty-Fifth Street Hotel.'

'Wilbur Peabody, Forty-Fifth Street Hotel,' said the pawn broker, writing. He got thirty-six dollars from the cash register.

Johnny counted the money. 'Thank you, Uncle Charlie. I'll be back in a day or two to pick up the suit.'

'Do me a last favour,' Uncle Charlie said. 'Forget that you ever heard of Uncle Charlie, the easy mark. Give your future business to my competitor up the street, Uncle Ben.'

Johnny made a clucking sound with his tongue, winked at Uncle Charlie and strode to the door. Outside, Sam Cragg heaved a great sigh of relief.

'I never thought you'd get him up to thirty-six dollars.'

'I should have held out for forty,' Johnny said. 'I think he'd have given it.'

They crossed Eighth Avenue and were about to turn into Forty-Fifth Street, when Johnny caught sight of the lettering on a small store front. *Universal Stamp & Coin Sales*.

'Now we'll see what these old coins are really worth.'

They entered the store and a heavy-set, bald man of about forty looked up from a stamp catalogue he was studying.

'You buy rare coins?' Johnny asked.

'Depends what you've got,' was the reply. 'I'd certainly never refuse an eighteen twenty-two half eagle.'

'I sold the one I had last week,' retorted Johnny. He brought

out a handful of coins from his pocket. The dealer wrinkled his nose in disgust. 'Indian head pennies! A drug on the market.'

'Some of these are pretty rare,' Johnny said, 'and I've got some Barber head dimes here, too.'

The dealer made an impatient gesture. 'Everybody's got Barber head dimes.'

'Not eighteen ninety-four-Q's!'

'You got one?'

'Well, not exactly. But here, take a look at them.'

'I don't have to look. How many dimes and quarters you got? How many pennies?'

There's twelve quarters, ninety-eight pennies and twenty-four dimes.'

The dealer nodded. 'Two dollars and forty cents' worth of dimes, twelve quarters and ninety-eight pennies, that six dollars and thirty-eight cents. All right. I'll pay you two for one for the lot . . . Mmm, twelve dollars and seventy-six cents.'

'Are you kidding?' cried Johnny. 'Some of these coins are rare. The catalogue says that an eighteen seventy-two Indian head is worth thirty bucks.'

'Uncirculated,' replied the dealer. 'These are worn, some of them pretty thin.' He shrugged. 'That's the way I buy—two cents for the pennies, twenty cents for the dimes, and fifty cents for the quarters.'

'According to the catalogue prices——'

'Catalogue prices!' cried the dealer. 'Don't talk to me about catalogues. Those prices don't mean a thing.'

'Look,' said Johnny, pointing to a display in the showcase, 'you have some Indian head pennies right there. How much would you charge me for an eighteen sixty-four-L . . .?'

'Oh, you want to buy? That's different.' The dealer reached into the showcase and brought out a card of Indian head pennies. 'I just happen to have a very nice eighteen sixty-four-L penny that I can let you have for, uh, eighteen dollars.'

'Two cents,' said Johnny. 'That's what you said it was worth.'

'I did nothing of the kind. I said I'd give you a straight two cents apiece for the lot. I take a chance. Maybe they're all eighteen nineties, nineteen hundreds.'

'They aren't.'

'And what about my time?' pursued the dealer. 'I got to go over them.'

'I'll do it for you,' Johnny offered.

'Look, mister,' said the dealer, 'you got your business and I got mine. Two cents apiece for the pennies, twenty cents for the dimes and fifty cents for the quarters. Take it or leave it.'

'Good-bye,' said Johnny, heading for the door.

The coin dealer waited until Johnny had the door open. Then he said, 'Three cents!'

Johnny did not even look back. Outside, he said, 'The cheap chiseller!'

'I dunno,' Sam said, 'three cents for a cent don't seem so bad to me.'

'We can always come back to that, but I've got a hunch that these coins are lucky pieces.'

'They wasn't lucky for the doll,' retorted Sam.

'She's wearing a mink coat. That's luck, isn't it?'

'Yeah, but she lost her boy friend.'

'That might have been a lucky thing for her. For that matter, we don't know that she didn't help it along. You know, sort of nudged him a little.'

'How can you nudge a guy with a bullet?'

'I dunno,' said Johnny, 'but I think I'll try to find out.' He made the remark casually and they had gone several steps down Forty-Fifth Street before Sam Cragg suddenly stopped. 'No, Johnny!' he howled. 'You're not going to be a detective again.'

'Do you know any other way of making any money?'

'We can sell books like we always did.'

'We could sell books if we had books to sell,' said Johnny, 'but you know very well that we can't get any books from Mort Murray until he's raised enough money to pay his back rent, and get his stock of books out of hock.'

'Aren't there some other books we can sell?'

'You name them.'

'You know I can't, Johnny. That's in your department. Only—you know what happens every time you play detective. We wind up behind the eight-ball and I get a punch in the nose.'

'What's a punch in the nose to a guy like you, Sam?'

'Nothin'. It ain't the punch in the nose so much, it's the—well, you know . . .'

'What?'

'The—the things I suffer. Somebody trying to kill you or me. The cops . . .'

'The cops are breathing down our necks right now. You haven't seen the last of Lieutenant Madigan. I've been thinking it over, Sam. We're on the warm spot. We're liable to wind up in a nice little cell built for two.'

Sam winced. 'Don't joke about that, Johnny. You know how I always hate to be in jail.'

'You don't hate it any more than I do. So let's get busy and keep out.'

Sam groaned in surrender. 'All right, what do we do?'

'I think a little visit to old Jess Carmichael ought to start the ball rolling.'

'Ain't Carmichael the guy that owns all the grocery stores?'

'That's him. And there's one of his little old stores right there.'

THEY crossed the street and approached a wide store front which was almost completely covered with the name of the store and various sales slogans. On the glass door was the notation, in quite modest lettering:

Carmichael Store —1144

They entered the store. Although it was early evening the place was well patronised. They approached one of the checkers.

'The manager,' John said easily.

The checker pressed a buzzer and a clarion call went up all over the store. After a moment a man wearing a tan jacket approached the checker.

The latter indicated Johnny. 'He wants to see you.

'No-no,' said Johnny to the manager. 'I want to see Mr. Carmichael.'

The manager looked at Johnny puzzled. 'Who?'

'Jess Carmichael. The boss.'

The store manager's eyes suddenly narrowed. 'What's the idea?'

'No idea. I want to talk to Old Jess. This is his store, isn't it?'

'Yes,' said the grocery manager. 'It's his store, all right. Store Number eleven forty-four.'

Sam tugged at Johnny's sleeve. 'Hey, does he mean Carmichael's got eleven hundred and forty-four stores?'

'Twenty-one hundred and fifty-nine,' said the manager, 'unless he's opened a couple of dozen today that I don't know about.'

Johnny nodded. 'Old Jess must be rolling in it. Well, that's fine, just fine. Now if you'll tell him that I'd like to see him.'

'You must be crazy!' the store manager finally exploded. 'You expect him to be here—selling groceries, maybe?'

'Why not?'

The man tried hard to compose himself. 'Look, mister, a joke's a joke, but I'm a busy man. Will you go and bother somebody else?'

'Is it too much bother for Mr. Carmichael to talk to a customer?' demanded Johnny. 'I've spent a lot of money in Carmichael stores and I think the least Carmichael can do—'

'Go away!' cried the store manager. 'I'm busy. So's Mr. Carmichael.'

'So am I,' snapped Johnny. 'So let's cut it short. Do I see the boss, or don't I?'

'I've never seen him,' gritted the groceryman. 'I wouldn't know him if I did see him. He's a name, that's all. He's never been in this store and he'll probably never come in.'

'That's a funny way to run a business,' growled Johnny. 'Man owns so many stores he can't even get around to look at them. All right, if he isn't here, where can I find him?'

'His office, his home. How should I know?'

'That sounds silly,' Johnny proceeded. 'You're the manager of this store, ain't you? Suppose something happens? Who do you call?'

'The district manager.'

'Does *he* know Carmichael?'

'I doubt it. I doubt if he's ever seen him. He reports to somebody higher up.'

'And the somebody higher up?'

'How do I know?'

'Somebody's got to know. Somebody's got to be able to get to Carmichael.'

'Sure, sure. There's somebody 'way, 'way up, who probably even knows where he lives——'

'He lives in Manhasset,' suddenly said the checker, beside the store manager. 'I read it in a magazine once.'

'Thanks,' Johnny said to the checker. 'You're a bright alert worker. Some day you'll be manager of this store and he'—nodding to the manager—'will be holding down your job.'

He turned and went out of the store, followed by Sam. Outside Sam said, 'Manhasset?'

'Yep. Mmm, that's out on Long Island. Twenty-some miles. Probably cost us more than a buck apiece, round trip on the Long Island Railroad. We've only got a dollar forty-five, thanks to that appetite of yours.'

'We got the pennies and dimes—'

'I'm not going to spend those. Not unless I really have to and we can't spend the rent money.'

Sam brightened. 'Then we can't go out to Manhasset.'

'Oh yes, we can. There are ways of travelling without money.'

'Not walking, Johnny!'

'Are you kidding? I don't like to walk any more than you do. I was thinking of riding out there. In a nice, shiny limousine. A Cadillac.'

'What's the matter with a taxi?'

'You've got to pay for a taxi—cash.'

'But you'd have to pay for a limousine, too.'

'We didn't pay for our lunch today, did we?'

Sam groaned. 'Again?'

'Necessity, my boy, necessity. And don't feel bad about it. Anybody who can afford to buy Cadillacs and rent them out can afford to, uh, take a little chance.'

They continued on down Forty-Fifth to Park Avenue and turned north to the Barbizon-Waldorf Hotel. In the vast lobby Johnny found the bell captain's desk.

'I say, old man,' Johnny said, 'I'd like to rent a car for the evening.'

'Yes, sir,' said the bell captain. 'With or without a driver?'

'Oh, with a driver, I suppose. This city traffic, you know . . .'

'Yes, sir, I know. Let's see. Will you want it by the mile or by the hour?'

'What's the difference?'

'It's thirty cents by the mile. Six dollars per hour.'

'I think I'd better take it by the hour, then. I want to take a drive out to Long Island and visit awhile.'

'What is the number of your room, sir?'

'Eight twenty-one,' replied Johnny truthfully, although he neglected to say that this was the number of his room at the Forty-Fifth Street Hotel.

'Thank you, sir,' said the bell captain. 'I believe there's a car at the service entrance now. I'll just phone and make sure.'

A few minutes later, Johnny and Sam climbed into the tonneau of a Fleetwood Cadillac. A uniformed chauffeur turned in his seat and touched the visor of his cap. 'Where to, sir?'

'Manhasset.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Jess Carmichael's place; do you know where it is?'

'I believe it's near the Whitney estate, sir.'

Johnny winked at Sam. 'So it is.'

The car rolled smoothly out of the hotel garage, turned toward the East River Drive and purred along to the Triborough Bridge. A half-hour later they left the parkway and sped along a winding drive. A few minutes more and they approached a wrought-iron gate.

A guard stepped out of a small stone house and moved up to the limousine. He touched his cap.

'I'm calling on Mr. Carmichael,' Johnny said easily.

'Is he expecting you, sir?'

Johnny shrugged. 'More or less, I imagine.'

'Could I have your name, sir?'

'Fletcher, Johnny Fletcher.'

'Now comes the trouble,' said Sam under his breath.

The guard stepped back into his little house and picked up the phone. A moment later he returned to the limousine. 'Wilkins, the butler, says he doesn't have your name down. What is it about?'

'Does it have to be about anything?' Johnny asked tartly. 'Tell this Wilkins or whatever his name is, that I'm a customer of Mr. Carmichael's. That's all, don't add another word.'

The guard frowned but went back into his house. He talked again into the phone, then came out and pressed a button that swung open the gates.

The limousine rolled up a curved drive and stopped before a pile of dressed stone that was worth roughly half a million, give or take a hundred thousand.

'May be a while,' Johnny said to the chauffeur of the hired car.

'That's all right, sir,' the man said. 'I've a book to read.'

They got out of the Cadillac and walked up to the front door. Johnny leaned on the door button. The chimes were still bonging inside when a liveried butler opened the door.

'Mr. Fletcher?'

'That's right, Wilkins. I just stopped in to offer my condolences to Jess.'

'It's a very sad thing, sir,' said the butler. 'Mr. Carmichael is taking it very badly.'

'That's only natural.'

The butler consulted a leather booklet in his hand. 'I'm afraid I don't have your name here, sir.'

Johnny looked at him blankly. 'Are you supposed to have it?'

'Yes, sir, you see, there are so many people who try to call

on Mr. Carmichael that he found it necessary to make up a list of his friends to whom he is in.'

'And my name isn't in the book? Well, what do you know about that?'

'If you could tell me the nature of your business. Joseph, at the gate, said that—that you were a customer, but I didn't understand——'

'Then why'd you let me through the gate?'

Wilkins looked at Johnny uneasily. 'Well, Joseph said that your car—'

'... was a Cadillac. If I'd come up in anything smaller I suppose I couldn't even have gotten this far?'

'I didn't mean that, sir. It's only that ...' The butler again took refuge in his leather book. 'Are you a friend of Mr. Carmichael's?'

'From the look of things,' Johnny said coldly, 'I guess I'm not.' He paused, then added sarcastically, 'But if it isn't asking too much of you, I'd appreciate it if you'd just step in and tell Jess that Johnny Fletcher is here.'

'And your business?'

Johnny turned and struck Sam violently on the shoulder. 'Now, how do you like that?' He turned back to Wilkins. 'Tell Jess that I'm a customer of his. Tell him that. No more and no less. And if he still doesn't want to see me, that's that.'

The butler walked off, crossing the large wide hall and entering a door which he closed behind him. He was gone four or five minutes, then returned.

'Mr. Carmichael will see you in the library.'

He led the way through a drawing room, another hall, then opened a pine-panelled room and stood aside. Johnny and Sam went into the library, a room some twenty by thirty feet in size, lined with bookshelves containing mostly leather-bound and other unread books.

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JESS CARMICHAEL was seated in a large green leather chair. Across the room, a younger man stood examining the tooling on some of the leather volumes.

Carmichael looked at Johnny, frowning. 'Fletcher?'

'That's right, Mr. Carmichael. May I offer my condolences . . . ?'

Carmichael made an impatient gesture of dismissal. 'I never saw you before in my life.'

'Neither have I seen you, sir.'

'Why'd you tell Wilkins you were an old friend?'

'I never told him anything of the kind.'

Carmichael scowled. 'I never forget a name or a face. Fletcher? No, I'm certain. I've never done business with you.'

'Oh, yes, you have,' Johnny said. 'I've been a customer of yours for a good many years.'

'Ridiculous! I'm the only man in my entire organisation who knows the name of every customer we've got. What stores do you represent?'

'None, but——'

'That's what I thought. You're not with the A & P, or the Safeway Stores, or even the IGA.'

'I didn't say I was.'

'Then who the devil are you?'

'A customer. I've bought at your stores for twenty years, more or less. Not only in New York, but in other cities.'

A strange expression came over Jess Carmichael's face—an expression very much like that of a man who has bitten into an apple and discovered therein a half a fat worm.

'Say that again!' he cried.

'I've bought at your stores for twenty years.'

'You're a—a *retail* customer?'

The young man turned from the bookshelves and studied Johnny Fletcher thoughtfully.

Johnny said, 'That's right. And I've always been a booster of the Carmichael Stores. Your prices have been good, your merchandise has been fine. Up until recently. I think you should know, however, that I'm not satisfied with your corned beef hash. It used to be that there was plenty of good red meat in a can, but I bought one last week on Forty-Fifth Street—Store eleven forty-four, in case you're interested—and I had to search for the meat. Potatoes, that's all there was in the can, potatoes and here and there a teentsy-weentsy bit of the old corned beef. . . .'

Jess Carmichael bounded out of his chair. He took two quick steps toward Johnny, then stopped. There was a wild look in his eyes.

'Who—who sent you here?'

'No one. I came on my own. Uh, this is my friend, Sam Cragg.'

'Harya, Mr. Carmichael,' said Sam, extending his hand.

Carmichael did not even look at Sam. His eyes threatened to bulge from his head. He shook his head and his eyes went to the young man by the bookshelves. 'James, who would perpetrate a joke at a time like this?'

'I couldn't say, Uncle,' replied the young man. 'It's most certainly in bad taste.'

He came forward. 'I say, old boy, don't you know that Mr. Carmichael's son—my cousin, Jess—was, ah, I mean, died today?'

'Of course I know it. That's why I'm here.'

'Eh?'

Johnny looked past Carmichael and saw a newspaper on a

desk. He crossed to the desk and picked up the newspaper. 'My name's in here,' he said. 'Ah, yes, here. . . .' He read, '... The two men, John Fletcher, and Sam Cragg, were described by Miss Cummings as—'—'

'Cummings!' cried Jess Carmichael. 'Don't mention that woman's name in this house.' He stabbed a well-manicured forefinger at Johnny. 'And you—I remember your name now; you're the man the police suspect of killing my son.'

'No,' said Johnny, 'Lieutenant Madigan's already cleared me.'

'Who's Lieutenant Madigan?' Carmichael demanded.

'Homicide, in charge of the investigation. A very good man. I've helped him now and then.'

'You've helped him?'

'My hobby,' Johnny said modestly. 'Crime detection. When the police fail, that's where I come in.'

'Oh, say, now,' expostulated the young man. 'You're spreading it on a bit thick now, aren't you?'

Johnny regarded him sharply. 'I don't believe I got your name.'

'I'm James Sutton.'

'One of the suspects?'

Sutton showed petulance. 'Here, now, I'm Mr. Carmichael's nephew.'

'A prime suspect, too,' declared Johnny. 'The nephew's always the chief suspect and in nine cases out of ten he turns out to be the murderer.'

'I think,' said Jess Carmichael, 'I've had about all of this that I can take. Mr. Fletcher, I've had a difficult day and tomorrow morning I must talk to the deputy police commissioner—'

'You mean he hasn't questioned you yet?'

'Why should he? He had the decency to respect a man's privacy at a time like this.'

'Mr. Carmichael, I'll put it to you bluntly,' Johnny said.

'Do you want to, ah, apprehend the murderer of your son?'

'Of course I do,' snapped Carmichael, a glint coming into his eyes, 'and I promise you that he will be apprehended—and punished. If it takes every dollar——'

'It won't,' Johnny said. 'It won't cost you much at all. For a modest fee, I'll run him down.'

'The police are quite capable of doing that,' Carmichael said coldly. 'And now I must bid you good evening.'

'Very well, sir, but if you should change your mind, I'd like to give you my address . . .'

'That won't be necessary. I shall not change my mind.'

Johnny hesitated. He looked at Sam Cragg, who was regarding him anxiously.

'Very well, Mr. Carmichael.'

'I'll go out with you,' James Sutton offered. 'Good night, Uncle Jess.'

'Good night, Jim, good night.'

The butler was hovering about in the hall and led Johnny, Sam and Sutton to the front door. As they stepped out a convertible squealed to a stop beside the limousine that had brought Johnny and Sam out to Manhasset.

A girl sprang out and came running toward the door. 'Jim, she cried, 'how is he?'

'Taking it pretty badly,' Sutton replied.

'I would have come sooner, but then you know . . .'

 She stopped and looked sharply at Johnny and Sam.

'Fletcher's my name,' Johnny offered. 'This is my friend, Sam Cragg.'

'You're from the police?'

'Not exactly, miss.'

Sutton exclaimed. 'Don't try exchanging words with him, Hertha. He'll mix you all up.'

'Hertha,' grinned Johnny. 'That's from Swinburne—the goddess of the nether regions, or something like that.'

The girl looked at Johnny, puzzled. 'I don't believe I ever met you.'

'That's my loss,' Johnny said gallantly. 'I'd be glad to call on you tomorrow.'

'Go in and talk to the old man,' Sutton said quickly. 'He needs someone to cheer him up.' He took Johnny's elbow. 'D'you mind giving me a lift into town, old boy?'

Johnny minded, but Sutton was using pressure to steer him to the limousine. 'All right,' he said, 'as long as you're twisting my arm.'

They got into the limousine, with Johnny sitting in the middle of the rear seat. 'The Barbizon-Waldorf,' Johnny said to the chauffeur, 'unless I can drop you somewhere along the way.'

'The hotel's fine,' Sutton said easily.

The car started down the winding driveway. Johnny leaned back. 'Hertha,' he said musingly. 'Fancy name. Wouldn't go well with Smith, though, would it?'

'You're fishing again,' Sutton accused. 'All right, I'll bite; her last name's Colston. She was Jess's fiancée.'

'Jess, Junior? I thought a little lady named Alice Cummings—'

'Miss Cummings,' Sutton said firmly, 'was not his fiancée.'

'She thinks she was.'

'Oh, I imagine she tried her best to hook him.'

'She hooked him for a mink coat,' said Sam.

Sutton shrugged. 'What's a mink coat?'

'Are you kidding?' cried Sam. 'Them mink coats cost two-three thousand bucks.'

'Some cost considerably more.'

'Even two-three thousand is all right for a doll who didn't even pay for her rabbit fur.'

'Rabbit fur?'

'Miss Cummings bought a sixty-nine dollar and fifty cent special about four years ago,' Johnny explained. 'The bill was so small it slipped her mind.'

'Well,' said James Sutton, 'that's interesting. But how do you know all this about Miss Cummings?'

'That,' said Johnny, 'is how we got into this. We skip-traced her and collected the dough.'

'Is that your business? Skip tracing, I believe you called it.'

'I was just helping out a friend.'

'A friend?' exclaimed Sam. 'Kilkenny ain't no friend of ours. Not after what he done to you.'

'A skip tracer,' mused Sutton. 'It sounds like an interesting vocation. Suppose someone moves and doesn't leave a forwarding address—is it possible to find them?'

'Kilkenny found us,' exclaimed Sam. 'On account of a measly old mandolin that I couldn't play anyway . . .' He stopped as Johnny dug his elbow into his ribs. 'What's the matter?'

'Mr. Sutton isn't interested in mandolins, Sam.'

'I'm interested in skip tracers,' Sutton said. 'You were saying about Miss Cummings—how you traced her. Just how did you do it?'

'There are tricks to all trades.' Johnny gave Sutton a quick sideward glance. 'I imagine the grocery business has its tricks, too.'

'I wouldn't know about that.'

'Aren't you in the grocery business?'

Sutton smiled. 'I own a few shares of Carmichael stock, but I'm not in the firm.'

'You like Wall Street better?'

'Tut tut, no more fishing. Let's stick to skip tracing.'

'All right,' said Johnny, 'let's. You want somebody skip-traced?'

'Possibly.'

'Then I'm your boy. There ain't a skip tracer in the business who can do a better job.'

'Who is this Kilkenny Mr. Cragg mentioned?'

Johnny made a deprecating gesture. 'Small stuff. He collects

old mandolin accounts. If you're looking for an old mandolin, I guess Kilkenny's as good a man as any. But if it's something important, Johnny Fletcher can do it quicker and better.'

'I like the way you got in to see Cousin Jess,' Sutton said. 'Mmm, could you locate a man who, let's say, disappeared twelve years ago?'

'You name him and I'll find him.'

'What does a skip tracer usually get?'

'Ten bucks,' Sam volunteered inadvertently.

Johnny gave him the elbow again. 'Finding a missing person isn't skip tracing. It's detective work.'

'Same thing, isn't it?' asked Sutton. 'A person owes a bill, you've got to find him to collect.'

'Skip tracing a man who owes a bill is minor-league stuff. But a man who's missing, uh, that takes real detective work. And you know what the better detective agencies charge.'

'I haven't the slightest,' Sutton said. 'This is all new to me. I'm willing to pay a fair price, though, to find my cousin—'

'Your cousin?'

'Lester Smithson.'

'What relation is he to Jess Carmichael, senior?'

'Nephew, same as I am. Uncle Jess had two sisters, Della and Carrie. Lester was Della's son. Carrie Carmichael was my mother.'

'Your aunt and your mother are both dead?'

'Yes.'

'Mmm,' said Johnny thoughtfully. 'I catch on. With Jess the third dead, that leaves you the next of kin.'

'Except for Lester.'

'Yeah, sure, but if *he's* dead, you're the heir.'

'I don't know. Uncle Jess could leave his money to the Smithsonian Institution, you know.'

'Not if you play your cards right. That makes a difference.'

'I'm afraid I don't follow you.'

'The fee for finding Lester. Since you're the heir to the Carmichael grocery stores, I'll naturally have to charge you a larger fee.'

James Sutton chuckled. 'You're a character, Fletcher. All right, name your price.'

'A hundred dollars a day.'

'Isn't that a little stiff?'

'It might be for the ordinary detective agency,' Johnny admitted, 'but when you hire Johnny Fletcher, you're hiring the best.'

'Let's say fifty dollars a day.'

'For my A Number One work?'

'Your best. Fifty dollars a day. And there's got to be a time limit, of course.'

'Ten days?'

'Five. Fifty dollars a day, for five days and a, ah, bonus of two hundred when you succeed.'

'Seven days and a five hundred dollar bonus?'

'Very well.'

'And a retainer of, say, two hundred?'

'I'll send you a check tomorrow.'

Johnny frowned. 'Couldn't you pay something now—just to bind the agreement?'

'I'm afraid I left my wallet at home.'

Johnny's frown became a scowl. 'I wasn't able to get to the bank today. Sam, how much money have you got on you?'

'Why, you know, Johnny, a dollar forty-five.'

'You, too?' Johnny shook his head. 'This is a bit awkward. Not even enough to tip the driver.' He turned back to Sutton. 'Haven't you got some small change on you? A tenner or so.'

Sutton drew a five-dollar bill from his pocket. Johnny eased it from between his fingers.

'This'll do.'

During their talk the rented limousine had crossed the Triborough Bridge and was rolling down the East River Drive. It turned west and a few minutes later ran smoothly into the service entrance of the Barbizon-Waldorf Hotel.

'A very nice drive,' Johnny said to the chauffeur. 'I may want you again, tomorrow.'

'Very good, sir,' replied the chauffeur. 'Just ask for Wilbur. Let's see, it's just about three hours. That'll be eighteen dollars, sir.'

'Very reasonable,' Johnny said, concealing a little wince. 'I made arrangements with the bell captain. Room eight twenty-one. Here—here's a little something for you.'

He handed the man the five-dollar bill he had just obtained from James Sutton. The man touched his visored cap. 'Thank you, sir. Room eight twenty-one.'

Johnny, Sam and Sutton walked into the hotel. 'I'll leave you now,' Sutton said. 'But I'll get in touch with you tomorrow. Room eight twenty-one, I believe you said.'

'That's right, eight twenty-one,' Johnny said blithely. 'But better give me your number, so I can call you if I get something important.'

'I'd rather get in touch with you,' Sutton said. 'I'm in and out.'

'So am I,' retorted Johnny.

'I'll leave a message, then.'

'I can leave one for you.'

Sutton suddenly grinned. 'Look, Fletcher, what's wrong with me phoning you here? You *are* in Room eight twenty-one, aren't you?'

'Sure,' said Johnny. 'Room eight twenty-one . . . at the Forty-Fifth Street Hotel.'

Sutton exclaimed softly. 'But you charged the limousine to . . .' Then he chuckled. 'You *are* a character. All right, the Forty-Fifth Street Hotel.'

'Now you might as well give me your address,' Johnny said. 'I'll find it out anyway, but that takes time and you want me to concentrate on finding Lester Smithson, don't you?'

'You've got a point there. Believe it or not, I happen to live here, up in the tower.'

Johnny grinned. 'Well, one of us lives here, anyway.'

'Now, don't go getting any ideas, like charging limousines to me.'

'Who, me?'

'That's right. I've lived here quite a while and they know me. I just thought I'd mention it.'

'Glad you did. Tomorrow, then.'

Johnny and Sam left the hotel and started to walk across town to the Forty-Fifth Street Hotel. Sam walked beside Johnny, his face wearing a heavy scowl.

'All right, Sam, out with it. What's eating you?'

'This detective stuff, Johnny. You know I don't like it.'

'Relax, Sam, we've got a paying client. How else could we make eight fifty in a week's time?'

'Sure, we'll make eight fifty. We always make money out of these things, but how is it we always wind up broke? And if we make all that dough, why is Peabody always about to lock us out of our hotel room?'

'That's one of the things I don't understand, Sam. One of us squanders the money. Which reminds me, how much did that lunch cost you today, the second lunch, I mean? When you gave the fifty-cent tip.'

Sam winced. 'All right, Johnny, I get the idea. I ought to keep my trap shut. I know I haven't got a chance arguing against you.'

'Don't feel badly about it. Nobody else can out-talk me either.' Johnny chuckled. 'That Sutton lad tried to talk fancy.'

'Yeah, but we haven't got any money from him.'

'We got a fiver out of him.'

'What kind of dough is that for a guy who lives in the Barbizon-Waldorf Tower? You ask me, he's pretty cosy with his money.'

'We've seen the colour of it, we'll get more, don't worry.'

Although it was after eleven o'clock when they entered the Forty-Fifth Street Hotel, Peabody, the manager, was in the lobby. He smiled wolfishly when he spied Johnny and Sam heading for the elevators.

'Mr. Fletcher,' he called.

Johnny turned to the desk. 'Harya, Peabody, a good night's sleep to you.'

'But not to you,' retorted Peabody. 'I've been thinking things over and I see no reason for letting you stay another night in this hostelry. As long as you're going to take up your abode in the subway, you might as well do it this evening.'

'We've had a rough day, Peabody. I need a good night's sleep because I'm going to be busy tomorrow.'

'So shall I be. Fumigating your room.'

'Good night, Peabody.'

Johnny stepped into the elevator but Peabody came dashing out from behind the desk. 'No, Albert, don't take them up!' he cried to the elevator operator.

With a sudden snarl of rage, Sam Cragg sprang out of the elevator and grabbed the hotel manager by the coat front. 'You heard Johnny, didn't you? We're tired and we want to go to bed.'

'Unhand me, you—you gorilla!' cried Peabody. 'This is the last straw. I shall not only lock you out of your room, I shall turn you over to the police.'

'On what charge?' snapped Johnny.

'Defrauding an innkeeper,' snarled Peabody, still struggling to get out of Sam's grip. 'It's against the law to engage hotel accommodations when you have no means of paying.'

'Let him go, Sam,' Johnny said. Then facing Peabody:

'Now, see here, I'm getting sick and tired of hearing you harping on that subject. Just how much do you say we owe you?'

'You know very well. It's thirty-six dollars and it might as well be—'

'Thirty-six dollars,' snapped Johnny. 'I've got a good notion to pay you and move out of the crummy joint.'

'Oh, you're moving, all right,' howled Peabody. 'Right now, you're moving.'

'On the other hand,' Johnny went on, 'I think I'll just pay up and stay here.'

'You're doing a lot of talking about paying,' sneered Peabody.

'Why shouldn't I? I always pay my honest debts. . . .' He reached into his pocket and brought out a sheaf of bills. 'Thirty-six dollars, did you say?'

Peabody gulped as he saw the money. 'Wh-where did you get that?'

'This small change? I've always got thirty-six dollars.

'Then why didn't you pay your bill when it was due?'

'Because you didn't ask me for it nice.'

Peabody skimmed through the bills, counting them. 'Very well, you made it. But there isn't going to be another time. You'll pay each and every week hereafter, at the end of the week. I've got a good notion to make you pay in advance.'

'Do you make other guests pay in advance?' cried Johnny.

'Other guests don't do to me what you do.'

'I'm not asking any favours,' Johnny growled. 'All I want is the same treatment as your other paying guests.'

Peabody opened his mouth to complain further, then thought better of it and whirling, went back behind his desk. Johnny and Sam rode up to their room on the eighth floor. When the door was closed on them, Johnny said, 'I was going to be decent about it and mail him the pawn ticket for his suit, but I dunno, now after the way he's treated us, I ought to tear it up!'

He didn't, however.

10

HARD knuckles pounded the door of Room 821. Johnny rolled over in bed and looked at the door. The knuckles massaged the door panels once more.

'Who is it?' he called.

'Open up, Fletcher,' cried a voice outside the door.

Sam Cragg sat up in bed. 'What's the idea, wakin' a man in the middle of the night?'

Johnny threw back the covers and strode to the door. He shot back the bolt and whipped open the door. J. J. Kilkenny, smiling nastily, stepped in. Sam shook his head, let out a roar and started around the bed to get at Kilkenny.

The skip tracer coolly produced a snub-nosed revolver. 'I'm not going to skin my knuckles on you, fat boy.'

'Fat boy?' roared Sam Cragg. 'Put down that dingus and I'll twist you into a pretzel.'

'Uh-uh,' said Kilkenny. He reached back with his foot and shut the door. 'Business before pleasure.'

'I've got no more business with you,' snapped Johnny.

'Oh yes, you have,' sneered Kilkenny. 'Remember that money you collected on the skip was twenty-two dollars short.'

'You forgot my ten-dollar commission.'

'I applied that on your own account,' Kilkenny pointed to Sam Cragg with his revolver. 'I haven't forgotten that little tab for the ape's mandolin.'

'Who you callin' an ape?' demanded Sam.

'You,' retorted Kilkenny.

Sam took another quick step forward, but Kilkenny kept the revolver pointed at him. 'Come ahead, fatso.'

'You've got no right to carry a gun,' Johnny said angrily.

'I got a licence, that gives me a right.'

'Since when are they giving licences to bill collectors?'

'People threaten me,' smirked Kilkenny. 'A man's got a right to defend himself. Like now—I got a claim against you birds and if you make a pass at me, I can shoot you and nothin'll happen to me. I'm only defending myself.'

'I ain't sure that pea-shooter'd even hurt me,' said Sam Cragg dourly. 'Don't crowd your luck.'

'I'll make this short and sweet,' snapped Kilkenny. 'You didn't give me all the money that Miss Cummings gave you. I happen to know that she gave you a piggy bank full of small change. I want it.'

Johnny's eyes went involuntarily to the dresser where the limping goose bank had stood the day before. It was gone and for a moment Johnny thought that someone had stolen it. Then he recalled having swept it off the dresser into an open drawer the night before.

'There's only a bunch of pennies in the bank.'

'Yeah, about twenty bucks' worth. I want them.'

'You're welcome if you can get them out of the bank. I couldn't. The slot's too narrow.'

Kilkenny held out his free hand. 'Give.'

Johnny turned his back on the bill collector and headed for the dresser. As he passed Sam, he winked and said quickly in an undertone, 'Ready!'

He reached past Sam, pulled open the dresser drawer and took out the bronze limping goose bank. 'Here,' he said to Kilkenny, and tossed the bank to him. He threw it to the right of Kilkenny, so the bill collector had to lunge for it with the hand holding the gun. The bank struck the gun and for an instant Kilkenny tried to juggle both the revolver and the limping goose.

This was enough for Sam. He took a headlong plunge at

Kilkenny, both hands flailing out. His head hit Kilkenny's midriff, his left hand struck the bill collector's right arm and closed around it. He gripped it savagely, twisting as both he and Kilkenny hit the floor.

Kilkenny cried out hoarsely in pain and the gun clattered to the floor. Johnny scooped it up just as Sam hit Kilkenny a short chopping blow on the chin with his fist.

Both Johnny and Sam stood up. Kilkenny's eyes were closed and he was moaning. Sam prodded him with his bare foot. 'Cut out the stalling,' he said, 'I hardly hit you.'

Kilkenny's eyes opened. 'Help me up,' he groaned.

'Get up yourself.'

Kilkenny got painfully to his feet, but the fight was gone from him. 'That was a sneaking trick you pulled,' he said to Johnny.

'Just like yours yesterday,' Johnny replied cheerfully.

'You want to go another fall?' Sam asked.

'Gimme my gun,' said Kilkenny, holding out his hand.

'Nixay,' said Johnny, 'that's one of the rules of the game. You pull a gun on a man and he takes it away from you, it's his gun.'

'That roscoe cost me twenty-seven fifty second-hand.'

'That's twenty-seven fifty you're out.'

Kilkenny blinked, drew a great breath and exhaled. 'All right, if that's the way you're going to play, I'll remember it. It'll be my turn again next time.'

'I'll be carrying this rod,' Johnny said darkly. 'You try anything on me when Sam isn't around and I'll be defending myself. Remember that.'

Kilkenny pointed to the limping goose bank. 'At least, can I have that?'

'I just told you—you lost.'

'But you still owe me twenty-two bucks on the Cummings skip,' protested Kilkenny, 'not to mention the sixty-seven on

the Ajax mandolin bill. That's eighty-nine bucks, altogether. All right, I promised you ten dollars for locating Cummings. That's seventy-nine bucks. 'Le'me have the bank and I'll knock off twenty—say, twenty-four—and call it an even fifty-five.'

'Call it an even seventy-five,' retorted Johnny. 'I like it better.'

Kilkenny scowled. 'Watch yourself, Fletcher. I'm a bloodhound. When you're least expecting me, I'll pop up—and the gorilla won't be around.'

'Gorilla!' cried Sam, and made another lunge at Kilkenny. But the star of the Acme Adjustment Agency collection force had had enough. He sprang back, whipped open the hall door and leapt through. Sam, in pyjamas, closed the door and whirled back.

'That's what I like before breakfast,' he cried cheerfully. 'A workout. Gives me an appetite.'

'We've got a buck forty-five,' said Johnny. 'Let's eat!'

A half-hour later Johnny and Sam sat in the Automat, with Sam polishing off his second order of corned beef hash. He looked wistfully across at Johnny. 'D'you suppose I could have another order, Johnny?'

Johnny shook his head. 'We've now got left the sum of twenty cents, Sam.'

Sam smacked his lips. 'The Automat makes the best corned beef hash in town, maybe in the whole country. Don't you think you could spend a couple of those dimes, the ones that ain't so old?'

'No, you've had enough to eat now. Some time during the day I'll get that advance from James Sutton, then you can fill up. Right now, I think we'd better start earning that money.'

'Where can you start on a deal like that? The guy disappeared twelve years ago.'

'From where?'

'How would I know?'

'Sutton isn't going to be much help. He wants information but he doesn't give out any.'

'Yeah, like last night. He didn't even want us to know where he lived.'

'The man who could probably tell us more about young Smithson than anyone is old Jess Carmichael.' Then, as Sam winced: 'He'll probably be busy with the police commissioner this morning. I think maybe we'll try it from the back door.'

'What back door?'

'Alice Cummings'.

'Oh, no!' cried Sam.

'She hates us,' Johnny mused. 'She may be mad enough so she'll spill something.' He nodded. 'Yes, I think we'll run up to her little old apartment.'

'You never do things the easy way, do you, Johnny?' groaned Sam. 'I ought to have some more corned beef hash if we're gonna face that little lady.'

'Later.'

The receptionist at the Chateau Pelham tore off her head-phone as Johnny and Sam walked past her desk, headed for the elevators.

'Just a moment, please!'

Johnny grimaced, but turned back. 'We're just going up to see Miss Cummings.'

'Everyone must be announced.'

'She's expecting us.'

'Is she? Well, I'll still have to announce you. Let's see, one of you is Mr.—ah—Fletcher, is it?'

'What a memory!' exclaimed Johnny.

'I remember you both. And I do *not* think Miss Cummings will want to see you. However . . .' The operator made a phone connection, waited a moment, then said, 'Miss Cummings, those two men who were here yesterday. . . . Yes,

that's right. . . . Fletcher. . . .' She showed surprise, then nodded. 'Very well, Miss Cummings.' She broke the connection and said disapprovingly to Johnny, 'You may go up.'

Johnny winked at her. 'I told you she was expecting us.'

They stepped into the elevator. Sam regarded Johnny puzzled. 'I didn't think she'd let us in.'

Johnny shrugged. 'Women!'

They stepped out on Alice Cummings' floor and before Johnny could even press the door buzzer, the door was opened by Alice Cummings. She was wearing an expensive dressing gown of a delicate violet colour. A smile was on her lips, but none in her eyes.

'Come in, Johnny,' she said cordially. 'And—Mr. Spragg, is it?'

'Cragg, lady, Sam Cragg.'

'Sam,' Alice Cummings purred. She regarded Sam fondly. 'Strong, aren't you?'

'The strongest man in the world,' Sam replied proudly, flexing his muscles as he passed Alice into the apartment.

Alice Cummings closed the door. 'I'm glad you came,' she said, addressing Johnny. 'I was a little short of money yesterday. But I have it now.'

'Oh, I didn't come because of that,' Johnny said. 'We're all squared away, financially.'

'But I don't believe I gave you enough. I was several dollars short, wasn't I?'

'We're always glad to take money,' Sam said.

Johnny shook his head. 'You were a little short, but I said it was all right, so it's settled. You don't owe a thing.'

Alice Cummings crossed to a table and picked up a red leather purse. 'I always pay my debts. Let's see, the total bill was seventy-four dollars, I believe. And I gave you . . . how much in bills?'

'Fifty-seven. But—'

'Then I owe you seventeen dollars.' She took out a fat roll of bills and began peeling off notes. 'Now, if you'll just give me back the little bank I gave you for security . . .

'I haven't got it with me.'

'You can get it.' She looked at him sharply. 'You haven't had time to spend those coins, have you?'

'No,' said Johnny, 'but don't bother. I accepted them in full payment.'

'I want them back. I've been saving them for a long time.'

'They were only pennies and dimes and quarters. About six dollars' worth . . .'

'Get them for me, please. I want them.'

Johnny hesitated. 'I don't know whether I still have them all.'

'You had no right to spend them. They—they're rare coins.'

'That ain't what the coin dealer said,' Sam exclaimed. 'He offered us two for one, that's all.'

'So you've taken them to a coin dealer,' said Alice Cummings. Her eyes, already hard, became flinty. 'You had no right. I gave you that bank just for security—'

'Ever hear of a man named Kilkenny?' Johnny suddenly shot at her.

'Kilkenny——' Alice caught herself. 'What's he got to do with this?'

'He wanted the bank, too.'

'Who is Kilkenny?'

'He's a collector for the A.A.A.—the Acme Adjustment Agency.'

'Isn't that the outfit you work for?'

'Not exactly. I don't really work for the A.A.A.—I was just helping out J. J.'

'Look, Fletcher,' Alice Cummings said bluntly, 'I don't give a hoot and a holler for this A.A.A., or J. J. Kilkenny, or you. I've paid you your money and I want what's mine. I want that goose bank and what's in it. And I want it now.'

Johnny said, 'How long is it since you're seen Lester Smithson?'

Johnny was not sure whether the name scored or not. Alice was already pretty angry. She exclaimed, 'Who the devil is Lester Smithson?'

'Jess Carmichael's cousin.'

'I'm not talking to you about Jess Carmichael. All I want from you is that bank and the coins it contained. I want it today—as soon as you can get it.'

Johnny held out his hand for the seventeen dollars. 'All right, Alice, you'll have it.'

Alice drew back. 'Not so fast, you'll get this money when I get mine. You'll be back in—an hour?'

'Maybe sooner.' Johnny signalled to Sam and they left the apartment.

In the elevator going down, Sam said, 'You got the coins in your pocket, haven't you? You could've given them to her.'

'I would have given them to her, but she was too anxious.'

'That seventeen bucks wouldn't be bad. That's about all the coins would bring.'

'According to the dealer we talked to last night. But there are other dealers.'

'The seventeen bucks is sure.'

Johnny made no further comment until they had left the building. Then he said, 'Hasn't it occurred to you that Kilkenny was awfully anxious to get that bank?'

'That's his job. You know how bill collectors are. He said himself that he was a bloodhound.'

'So am I,' said Johnny grimly. 'At least, I've got the nose for one and I'm beginning to smell a strange odour. I think we'll run back to the hotel.'

11

A SHORT while later they re-entered the Forty-Fifth Street Hotel and rode up to the eighth floor. The door of Room 821 was unlocked, which was not too unusual, since the maids were in and out with their cleaning and linens. But when Johnny pushed open the door, he let out a low whistle.

'Jeez!' exclaimed Sam. 'The place looks like a cyclone hit it.'

The beds were stripped, the blankets and sheets thrown on the floor. The drawers of the single dresser were open and the contents dumped on the floor. The carpet had even been torn loose from the floor and peeled back around the edges.

'I was half expecting this,' Johnny said thoughtfully.

'Burglars, you mean? What've we got worth stealing?'

'The goose bank. Do you see it around?'

'No, I don't, but the doggone thing was empty.'

'Search,' said Johnny. 'See if it's around.'

They both got down on their knees and peered under the bed and dresser. They shook out the blankets and sheets, threw them back on the bed. Two minutes' search convinced them that the limping goose bank was not in the room.

Johnny got to his feet. There was a discreet knock on the door.

'Come!' he called.

The door opened and Eddie Miller came into the room. Eddie was the bell captain of the Forty-Fifth Street Hotel, a sharp little man in his mid-thirties who knew all the answers and had invented many of the questions.

'Termites?' he asked, looking around the littered room.

'Big ones,' replied Johnny.

Eddie nodded. 'I know you're in the middle of a caper, Mr. Fletcher, what with the law coming here last night and Mr. Peabody prancing and smirking. And things going on.'

'Such as what, Eddie?'

'You paid your rent last night,' Eddie suggested.

Johnny shook his head. 'I had to scramble for it. We're broke.'

'Well, that's normal for you. You know I'm on your side, Mr. Fletcher. You've always done right by me when you had it. So this is for free. I mean until you get back into the chips. Some people been asking me about you.'

'People?'

'First two, then one. The two'—Eddie gestured about the room—'I guess they're the ones did this. They looked like mugs.'

'What did they want to know?'

'Your room number. One of them slipped me fifty cents, but I told him it was worth my job to give out a guest's room number. So the other guy gave me a buck.'

'And you gave them the room number?'

'Sure, why not? They could have got it at the desk. For that, Haskins, the day clerk, would give them a guest's key.'

'How much do you charge for a key?'

Eddie grinned. 'I held out for five. I didn't think you'd mind. After all, your tux is at the, ah, cleaners, isn't it? Along with your overcoat and your four other suits. They—they didn't swipe anything, did they?'

'A piggy bank, that's all,' said Sam Cragg.

Eddie's face fell. 'I didn't know you had anything in here worth while.'

'Oh, this wasn't worth much, Eddie,' said Johnny easily. 'Just a man's life, that's all.'

'You're kidding!'

'Maybe I am. All right, I won't hold it against you. You've got to make a living, too. What about the other one—the one who came later?'

'Harry Flanagan. He didn't know that I knew him, but he stayed here a week four years ago. He's one of the boys. You can probably see him on Broadway and Forty-Eighth any afternoon.'

'What's he do for a living?'

Eddie grinned. 'He hustles. You want a crap game, a good time, Harry'll fix it for you. You want to buy a diamond ring, Harry'll get it for you wholesale. You want to meet the blonde in the second row, at Binsky's, Harry knows her. He'll introduce you.'

'Nice lad.'

'I can't figure how come he's interested in you. You're not exactly a farmer from Trufant, Michigan.'

'What'd he want to know about me?'

'The usual. How you made a living. He seemed to think you were a private eye or something.'

'How come?'

'He let it out that you were investigating a friend of his.'

'He mention the name?'

'Uh-uh, but it's a babe.'

'He say so?'

'No, but he's a little too well-dressed these days. Either he made a big strike lately, or he's got some babe buying him his clothes. A babe with money.'

The phone rang. Johnny stepped to the bed and scooped it up. 'Hello!'

The voice of James Sutton said, 'Mr. Fletcher? Glad I caught you in. I've been thinking over our little deal of last night. I've decided not to go ahead——'

'You can't quit now,' Johnny cried in sudden desperation. 'I've already been working on it and I've got something for you.'

'What?' asked Sutton.

'I'll come right over and tell you.'

'Tell me now.'

'I can't, over the phone. I'll be there in ten minutes.'

Johnny slammed down the receiver and whirled on Sam Cragg. 'Hold down the fort, Sam.'

'What's the matter?'

'Our pigeon's got cold feet. I've got to warm them up again. Stay here, just in case we have some more callers. I'll see you later, Eddie.'

Johnny tore out of the room. Out on the street, he hailed a waiting cab and jumped in. Ten minutes later he entered the Barbizon-Waldorf. He went to a house phone.

'Mr. James Sutton.'

After a moment, Sutton answered the phone.

'Johnny Fletcher. I'm downstairs. What's your room number?'

There was a slight hesitation. 'Thirty-four twenty-two, but don't come up for ten minutes.'

Johnny hung up and walked to the elevators. A car was about to leave and he stepped in. He got out on the thirty-fourth floor and a moment later pressed the door buzzer of Room 3422.

The door was opened instantly by James Sutton. He scowled. 'I said ten minutes.'

'My watch is stopped,' said Johnny, stepping into the room. A quick glance around showed him that Sutton was living well. The suite consisted of at least three rooms and at the going prices of the Barbizon-Waldorf must have cost Sutton at least a thousand a month.

Sutton closed the door and said, 'I still think it was a mistake to engage you, Fletcher, and if you don't mind——'

'I do mind,' Johnny snapped. 'Especially, when I'm already on the trail of Lester Smithson.'

'I don't see how you've had time——'

'I put my mind to it last night, Mr. Sutton,' Johnny said smoothly. 'That's the way I operate. When the ordinary investigator is guzzling his beer, or making a night of it, I'm working. I work all the time, during the day, at night. I go to sleep with a problem and when I wake up during the night I think of it. It's on my mind *always*. So, last night, about two in the A.M. I found that I couldn't sleep so I gave the problem some thought. I said to myself, suppose I was Lester Smithson, the nephew of a man who owns twenty-two hundred grocery stores. Suppose I had a cousin who was the son of the man who had twenty-two hundred grocery stores; ordinarily he'd be the man who'd inherit the grocery stores. Except that he wasn't interested in the grocery business. He was a playboy. Instead of selling groceries, he was interested only in buying mink coats for chorus girls. Now, there's nothing wrong with buying chorus girls mink coats, you understand. Everybody knows that chorus girls get awfully cold and there's nothing that keeps a chorus girl so warm as a fine set of pelts. I got nothing against the idea, personally . . . and the son of a man who owns twenty-two hundred grocery stores can't be expected to be spending his time weighing out sugar and coffee.'

'No,' said Sutton, 'of course not.'

'On the other hand,' Johnny went on, 'if you're only a cousin of a man who owns twenty-two hundred grocery stores, that's a horse of a different feather. Especially, if there's a direct heir in line for the grocery stores. So, now what can this cousin do to attract attention to himself and show his uncle what a fine man he is? Especially if said uncle started out in life as a poor grocery clerk?'

'He wasn't a grocery clerk,' said Sutton. 'He was a telegraph operator.'

'Same thing. He was a poor man who started at the bottom and worked his way up.' He paused a moment, beaming at Sutton. 'Begin to catch on?'

'No, I can't say that I do.'

'Smithson,' Johnny exclaimed. 'What could he do to put himself in solid with old man Carmichael? He could learn the grocery business from the ground up.'

'This is Lester Smithson you're talking about?'

'Who else? A sharp lad. He wanted some of those grocery stores, so he went about it the only way a guy in his position can go about it. He got a job in a grocery store—at the bottom!'

Sutton stared at Johnny in fascination. 'Where?'

Johnny made a gesture of dismissal. 'That's just a matter of detail. We know where he is—we can find him.'

'Fletcher,' said Sutton, shaking his head in admiration, 'that's the most fantastic story I've ever heard. There's only one thing wrong with it. Lester disappeared a matter of some twelve years ago.'

'So?'

'You think he's still, what did you say, weighing out sugar and coffee in one of the twenty-two hundred grocery stores?'

'He would be. Maybe, he's worked his way up to the meat counter.'

Jess Carmichael stepped out of the bedroom. 'Fletcher, I underestimated you last night.'

Johnny smiled pleasantly. 'Most people do.'

'You've imagination,' Carmichael turned to Sutton. 'What's this deal you made with him to find Lester?'

Sutton shrugged. 'It was just one of those things. Spur of the moment, Uncle Jess. I guess I should have minded my own business. Forget it, please.'

'No,' said Carmichael. 'I've missed Lester.' He paused. 'He's my nephew, the same as you are.' Pain crossed his features. 'Now that Jess is gone, you and Lester are the only family I have. I—know that Jess and Lester were never very friendly. I know, too, that it was probably Jess's fault, but now that he's dead I don't seem to remember those things. Or attach any

importance to them. The memory of Lester these last few years isn't so—so strong. But I remember the boy . . .' He stopped and swallowed hard. Then he became brisk again. 'Fletcher, hold that vivid imagination of yours in check for a moment and tell me, honestly—do you think you can find Lester?'

'Yes, Mr. Carmichael, I can. That is, *I* can find him if anyone can.'

'Weighing sugar?' Johnny knew when to be discreetly silent and Carmichael nodded. 'I'm going to let you try. Here . . .' He reached into his breast pocket and drew out a wallet. He skinned out five bills. 'Here's five hundred dollars. There'll be a thousand more when you find Lester Smithson. All right?'

Johnny took the bills and looked sharply at Sutton. The latter shrugged. 'Thanks, Mr. Carmichael. It's a deal. There's just one question I want to ask you. Exactly when and where did you last see Lester?'

Pain again flitted across the grocery magnate's face. 'I wish you hadn't asked me that.' He looked at Sutton. 'Perhaps you'd better tell him, James.'

'If you wish, Uncle Jess. It was at the Harover Club. We were all having lunch there and—well, I guess we'd all had one drink more than we should have. My cousin Jess and Lester—they had words and Jess threw a cup of black coffee in Lester's face. I'm afraid the coffee was rather hot. Lester walked out and that's the last time any of us saw him.'

'This was twelve years ago?'

'Last August.'

Johnny stowed away the five hundred-dollar bills. 'I'll get busy, Mr. Carmichael.'

'I'll expect to hear from you.'

Johnny nodded and stepped to the door. Out in the hall, he took the five bills from his pocket. 'It's a long time since I've seen any of you boys,' he said fervently.

RETURNING to the Forty-Fifth Street Hotel, Johnny entered Room 821 and found it empty. He looked in the bathroom, but Sam was missing. Puzzled, he rode down to the lobby. Eddie Miller came forward.

'What happened, Mr. Fletcher?' he asked.

'Sam Cragg go out?'

'Yes, that's what I was asking about. He came tearing down here about ten minutes ago, said he'd just got a call that you'd busted your leg——'

'No!' cried Johnny. 'Who called him?'

'He didn't say. Just that he'd got word that you'd been in an accident and had your leg broken.'

'Did he go to a hospital?'

'Not that I know of. But I saw him getting into a cab outside.'

'He didn't have any money to pay for a cab.'

'Maybe he forgot that.'

'Damn!' said Johnny. He strode to the desk. Mr. Peabody, the manager, turned from a ledger he was studying. Johnny drew out his new roll of bills and peeled one off.

'Break this for me.'

Peabody inhaled softly, took the bill and held it to the light. He scrutinised both sides, wrinkled the bill and scrutinised it again. 'Where did you get this, Fletcher?'

'Do you ask all the guests where they get their money?' Johnny snapped. He exhibited the other bills. 'I needed some change so I stopped in at my bank.'

'Five hundred dollars,' Peabody said softly. Then a shudder

ran through him. 'Yes, *sir*, Mr. Fletcher, how will you have it?'

'Doesn't make any difference—tens, twenties. Better give me some singles, for tipping purposes.'

Peabody counted out the bills, took one more look at the hundred-dollar bill and put it into the cash drawer.

Johnny signalled to Eddie Miller and went to the door.

A Sky-Top cab stood at the curb a few yards from the hotel. Johnny strode up to him. 'How long've you been waiting here?'

'Long enough,' the cabdriver replied, 'You want to get in?'

Eddie Miller came up. 'Hello, Ben,' he said, 'I want you to help out Mr. Fletcher.'

'Sure thing, Eddie.'

'How long have you been waiting here?' Johnny repeated.

'A half-hour, more or less. This is a quiet day.'

'About fifteen minutes ago,' Johnny went on, 'a man came dashing out of the hotel—about five-ten, two-twenty—'

'Sure,' said the cabby, scowling. 'I got beat out of a fare. Some guy's double-parked here—I don't think much of it, but then this guy comes out of the hotel and the double-parking guy scoots out in front of me and grabs the fare right under my nose.'

'What kind of a cab was it?'

The cabdriver shrugged. 'I don't know the hackie; he ain't from around Times Square, that I do know. He's driving a beat-up old jalopy . . . yeah, a Lucky Clover cab. There ain't many of those around.'

'A setup,' said Johnny, 'I don't suppose you got his number?'

'Naw, he beat it out of here like a bat out of hell before I could even tell him what I thought of him, stealing a fare out from under me. Hey—come to think of it, there was a guy already in the cab. I mean, in back.'

'Wait here,' said Johnny. 'I'll take a ride with you in a minute.' He turned and strode into the hotel lobby. He walked directly to the phone booth and looked up a number in the directory.

Eddie Miller hovered over him. 'Looks bad, huh?'

'Sam can take care of himself,' said Johnny. He turned. 'I've got to go out to see a man,' he said. 'If Sam happens to come back, tell him to sit tight and wait for me. Even if someone calls and tells him I broke my left arm and both legs.'

'Sure thing, Mr. Fletcher.'

Johnny strode out of the hotel and stepped into Ben's waiting cab. 'Forth-Ninth and Madison,' he said.

The cab went to Seventh Avenue and North, turned east on Forty-Sixth Street, scooted across to Madison Avenue and turned north. A few minutes later, Johnny got out and gave the driver a dollar. 'Can you wait here?'

'If it ain't too long.'

'It shouldn't be over ten minutes.'

'Then it's okay. You'll find me at the hack stand, or double-parked.'

Johnny walked a short distance and entered an office building. He consulted the building directory and rode up to the ninth floor. A moment later he stood before a ground glass door on which was lettered *Acme Adjustment Agency*.

He entered. There was a small reception room and apparently two private offices. A secretary with incredibly long, pointed nails was idling with a typewriter.

'The boss,' Johnny said.

'What's your name? I'll see if he's in.'

'Cragg, Sam Cragg.'

The girl gave Johnny a searching look and got up. She went to the right-hand ground-glass door and entered, closing the door behind her. She reappeared in a moment.

'What'd you want to see Mr. Hammer about?'

'About a man named Kilkenny,' Johnny replied. 'He works here.'

'Kilkenny? Mmm, I don't know if we have a man here by that name or not . . .'

'Hey!' cried Johnny. 'Cut it out. This outfit isn't *that* big!'

'What'd you want to see Mr. Kilkenny about?'

'I don't want to see Kilkenny. I want to see Mr. Hammer about Mr. Kilkenny.'

'Well, what about him?'

Johnny pointed to the private office. 'Hammer, that's who I want to see. In fact——' He suddenly shoved open the wooden gate and strode toward Hammer's private office. The receptionist let out a scream, but Johnny paid no heed. He slammed open Hammer's door and found Mr. Hammer whipping open the right-hand top desk drawer.

Mr. Hammer was a squat bald man who perspired copiously. He kept his hand in the top drawer. 'What do you mean bustin' in like that?' he snapped.

'You've got a man named Kilkenny working for you.'

'Have I?'

'If you haven't, then I've given money to a crook.'

Hammer's attitude changed. He actually raised his right hand out of the desk drawer, although he kept it near. 'You paid money to Kilkenny? On an account? Your name, please?'

'I told the girl—Sam Cragg.'

Hammer went quickly over a file of cards and extracted one. 'Sam Cragg, ah yes, Ajax Mandolin Company. You say you paid Mr. Kilkenny on this account? How much?'

'What does it say there?'

'It doesn't say anything. Mr. Kilkenny gave you a receipt, of course?'

'He gave me nothing.'

'Then I'm sorry, Mr. Cragg. Our collectors are instructed

to give receipts at all times. If you cannot produce one, I'm afraid the account still stands. And since this is long delinquent, I must insist upon prompt payment.'

'Go ahead, insist. But I want to talk to J. J. Kilkenny.'

'The matter is out of Mr. Kilkenny's hands. I'm handling this and I want payment at once, or else . . .

'Or else, what?'

'Or else I shall start immediate suit. Hey—wait a moment, here's a notation from J. J. Ah, yes, this alters things considerably. It seems, Mr. Cragg, that you pawned this instrument.' Mr. Hammer beamed happily. 'That, sir, is where you made your mistake. Selling property you did not own takes it out of the civil court and puts it into the criminal. Yes, Mr. Cragg, you've overstepped yourself. You will pay this bill—at once, sir—or I shall clap you into jail. What do you think of that?'

'I think it's a lot of hooey,' snapped Johnny. 'Look, I haven't got time to shilly-shally around with you. I want to see Kilkenny, that's all.'

Mr. Hammer made an impatient gesture of dismissal. 'Mr. Kilkenny is out of this, Mr. Cragg. It's no concern of his. But you, sir, are in serious trouble. I hope you are prepared to pay.'

'I'm not prepared to pay anything!'

'In that case—Miss Trout!' Hammer rose swiftly to his feet. 'A policeman . . .'

'Cut the comedy,' snarled Johnny. 'All I want from you is the whereabouts of J. J. Kilkenny.'

'And all I want from you is sixty-seven dollars!' Miss Trout appeared in the doorway. 'Telephone for a policeman, Miss Trout.'

'Yes, Mr. Hammer!' The girl turned and headed for the phone on her desk.

Johnny stepped to the door. 'Put down that phone!'

'Oh-ho!' cried Mr. Hammer. He whipped back to the desk drawer and drew out a short snub-nosed revolver. 'Violence, Mr. Cragg? All the more reason to call the police. Miss Trout——'

'Hold it,' said Johnny. 'Let's talk this over quietly.'

'We've talked, Mr. Cragg. Sixty-seven dollars, or the police.'

Miss Trout was already dialling. Desperately, Johnny cried, 'I'll pay!'

'Just a moment, Miss Trout,' called Hammer. 'But stand by. Very well, Mr. Cragg, let's see the colour of your money.'

'First of all,' said Johnny, 'my name isn't Sam Cragg.'

'Oh, we're going to try that now, are we? Very well, Miss Trout, you may phone.'

Miss Trout began dialling once more.

'I'll pay!' cried Johnny. He brought out a handful of bills.

'Wait, Miss Trout,' ordered Mr. Hammer.

Miss Trout waited with her hand on the phone. Johnny counted out sixty-seven dollars and put the rest of the money back in his pocket, carelessly revealing that one packet of bills consisted of hundreds. Mr. Hammer noted it greedily.

'Put the money on the desk, Mr. Cragg.'

Johnny held it in his hand. 'Here's the money, now let's talk. Your Mr. Kilkenny is involved in the Jess Carmichael murder.'

'You're wasting time.'

'Alice Cummings,' Johnny said, pointing to the file cards. 'Look it up—you collected money from her yesterday. Miss Cummings happens to be the little lady in whose apartment Jess Carmichael was murdered. And your Mr. Kilkenny just happens to be in it up to his fat ears.'

The collection agent smiled thinly, but there was vague uncertainty in his eyes,

'None of this will do you any good.'

'All right,' said Johnny grimly. 'Look at your cards—I dare you. If Miss Cummings' name isn't on one of them, I'll be willing to give you a hundred dollars.'

Hammer hesitated, then reached for the cards. 'I'll just prove to you that you're . . .' His fingers ran over the cards, stopped. His eyes narrowed and he shot a quick covert look at Johnny. Then he drew out the card.

'Just who are you, Mr. Cragg?' he asked slowly.

'First of all, I'm not Sam Cragg,' Johnny said quickly. 'And you'll find the card—Miss Cummings paid up in full.'

'Fifty-two dollars.' Hammer's forehead creased. 'It was accepted in full payment. Alice Cummings, mm.' Hammer mused thoughtfully. 'It is the same name, but there could be two women——'

'Uh-uh, there couldn't. How would I have known of her?'

'That's a point. Oh, you could have known about Alice Cummings, all right; her name is in all the papers since yesterday, but you couldn't have known that our Mr. Kilkenney collected money from her yesterday.'

The door of the outer office opened and J. J. Kilkenney came in. Johnny's back was turned to the door, however. He said to Mr. Hammer, 'Kilkenney's in it up to his ears. The least you can say about him is that he's a crook, but to me it looks like he's worse . . .'

Kilkenney crossed the short distance from the outer door to the inner and lunged into the room. His big hands reached out and grabbed Johnny. 'What'd you call me, you little pipsqueak?'

He whirled Johnny with his left hand and with the open palm of his right, rocked his head to the left, then to the right, Johnny, gasping in pain, hit the big man in the stomach with his fist and only bruised his knuckles.

Mr. Hammer saved him. He was half Kilkenny's size, but he was Kilkenny's boss. He said coldly, 'That'll do, J. J.!'

Kilkenny released Fletcher, but he was not soothed by any means. 'You and me are gonna have this out.'

'You lay a hand on me again,' Johnny said savagely, 'and I'll cut you to pieces.'

Kilkenny's big right hand reached automatically for Johnny, but the latter stepped back nimbly.

'Here, now,' Mr. Hammer said authoritatively. 'Let's get this straightened out. J. J., Mr. Cragg's made some serious charges against you.'

'Cragg?' exclaimed Kilkenny. 'This ain't Cragg. He's Fletcher, Sam Cragg's keeper.'

'Keeper?'

'Cragg's an ape, a muscle-bound gorilla. He can't talk unless this fellow tells him what to say.'

'I'll repeat that to Sam,' Johnny warned.

'You do. I'm itchin' to go another round with the ape and next time he may not be so lucky.'

'I've got news for you,' Johnny said. 'Sam can throw you all night long.'

'Now, wait a minute, you two,' interrupted Hammer. 'What's this all about? You—you announced yourself as Sam Cragg, now it turns out your name isn't Cragg.'

'I never told you my name was Cragg,' Johnny retorted. 'In fact, I tried to tell you it wasn't—'

'You gave your name to Miss Trout as Sam Cragg.'

'I told her it was about the Cragg account.'

'Which reminds me, that money in your hand you were going to give to me.'

Johnny put the money in his pocket. 'At the point of a gun, I was going to give it to you. I came here to find out about the moose'—indicating Kilkenny. 'He's in the Carmichael murder case.'

'Who says I'm in it?' roared Kilkenny.

'I say so. You came busting into my hotel room this morning with a gun and when I took it away from you——'

'Kilkenny!' cried Hammer. 'Have you been carrying a gun?'

'That ain't a bunch of violets in *your* fist,' sneered Kilkenny.

Hammer became aware that he was still holding the revolver in his hand and dropped it in the top desk drawer. 'I keep that here for protection, that's'all. But you know very well how I feel about collectors carrying firearms. You get in a jam and the police find you with a gun and——' He ran his finger across his throat. 'Now, what's this about your breaking into this man's room this morning?'

'His partner's Sam Cragg. We got a tab against him for sixty-seven round iron men.'

'I have Cragg's card here. He owes the money, all right.'

'That's all I was trying to do, collect it. Fletcher's a wise guy. That's why he's here now—trying to get out of paying an honest debt by getting me in trouble.'

'You're in trouble, Kilkenny,' growled Johnny. 'After we left the hotel this morning, you came back and tore the room apart. You stole the limping goose bank——'

'What's that?' cried Kilkenny. 'The—the bank's gone?'

'You took it, didn't you?'

'No!' howled Kilkenny. 'But I want it . . .!'

'Why?' Johnny asked quickly.

'Because the dame'—Kilkenny caught himself, then finished—'because the Cummings girl was short seventeen dollars and gave you the bank to make up. It's got seventeen dollars in it, money that belongs to me.'

'J. J.,' said Hammer, 'just what are you talking about?'
You collected the money from Alice Cummings.

'Go ahead,' Johnny said, 'explain that.'

Kilkenny tried. He swallowed hard and said, 'I told you

this bird's a wise guy. I ran down him and his gorilla friend over at the Forty-Fifth Street Hotel without a thin dime to their names.'

Johnny took the four hundreds from his pocket, ruffled them so that J. J. Kilkenny could note their denominations. 'Go ahead, big boy.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Hammer, 'continue.'

Kilkenny went on, 'One word led to another and he said he could collect deadbeat skips better than I could. I gave him the Cummings card and said I'd give him ten dollars if he could collect it.'

'Ten dollars,' Johnny said quietly. 'I said I'd run down a girl who skipped four years ago, for a measly ten bucks. Go ahead, big boy. But make it funnier.'

'Shut your trap,' snarled Kilkenny. 'Anyway, we made the deal and then he said the doll paid him only fifty-seven dollars.'

'And you didn't believe me and went back to her and found out she gave me a bank containing seventeen dollars. This was *after* Jess Carmichael was murdered.'

'That's a lie!' howled Kilkenny.

'Is it, J. J.?' asked Mr. Hammer.

'I told you he's just trying to get me into trouble.'

'Oh, sure,' said Johnny easily. 'With hundreds of dollars in my pocket, I make a deal with you to trace a woman who skipped four years ago—for a ten-dollar skip-tracer fee. And then I try to swindle you out of a piggy bank full of pennies. And'—Johnny paused, then suddenly shot at Kilkenny—'just why are you so anxious to get those pennies?'

'Because I got them coming to me.'

Mr. Hammer came to a sudden decision. 'I think, J. J., you and me have got some talking to do.' He looked at Johnny Fletcher. 'I don't think we need you any more.'

'Then I'll just be running along,' said Johnny. 'And don't forget, Mr. Hammer, ask old J. J. here *why* he wanted me to

try to collect a little old bill from Miss Alice Cummings—just about the time Jess Carmichael was going to be murdered in her apartment. And ask him——’

‘Get out of here!’ yelled Kilkenny hoarsely, making another lunge at Johnny.

Johnny evaded him and chuckled. He ducked through the office door to the outer room. With his hand on the hall door he called back, ‘*The Times* publishes the best want ads. J. J.!’

He went out quickly.

13

EDDIE MILLER left Room 821 shortly after Johnny Fletcher tore out to see James Sutton at the Barbizon-Waldorf. He left Sam Cragg to try to clean up the mess made by the person or persons who had ransacked it and stolen the limping goose bank.

Sam had the room about straightened out, when the phone rang. He took it off the hook. 'Sam Cragg talking,' he said.

An excited voice said, 'Are you the friend of John Fletcher?'

'Johnny Fletcher, yeah, him and me are buddies.'

'Well, I'm sorry to tell you,' the voice went on, 'your friend's suffered an accident.'

'An accident!' cried Sam. 'Holy cow—what happened to him?'

'He was dashing across Madison Avenue, against the lights, I might add, when he ran directly in front of my car—'

'You mean you're the guy who run him down?' howled Sam.

'I'm afraid so, but as I was just telling you, it was really his fault. However, I've taken him to my place and I've sent for a doctor—'

'A doctor? How bad is he hurt?'

'It looks like one of his legs is broken and I'm afraid there may be internal injuries.'

'Where're you at? I mean, where do you live? I'm comin' right over.'

'I think that would be wise. It's, uh, ten hundred one Madison Avenue, Apartment C. . . .'

'Ten hundred one Madison—Apartment C. I'll be right there. Tell Johnny I'm on the way.'

Sam slammed the receiver back on the hook and rushed for the door. He tore out, forgetting even to lock the door. Fortunately the elevator was on an upper floor and came down immediately.

In the lobby, Sam encountered Eddie Miller. 'I just got a phone call that Johnny's been run down by a car,' he told Eddie excitedly. 'His leg's busted, or somethin'. I'm goin' over to see him.'

'Gee, I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Cragg,' sympathised Eddie. 'What hospital . . .?'

But Sam was already heading for the door.

He tore out of the hotel, signalled to the taxi waiting in the hack stand some yards away. A taxi, double-parked nearby, whipped in front of the other taxi and skidded to a stop in the vacant space in front of the hotel. The door flew open.

'Hop in, mister!' said the driver.

Sam sprang into the taxi and it roared away. It was then that Sam discovered there was a man already in the cab. 'Oh, excuse me, mister,' he said. 'I just got word that my best friend was run over and I gotta see him right away. . . . It's ten hundred one Madison Avenue.'

'Sure,' said the man beside Sam. 'We'll take you there. Leonard, step on it.'

The man beside Sam was almost as heavy as Sam and probably several inches taller. He needed a shave, but the growth of beard did not quite conceal some scars on the heavy features.

'This is doggone decent of you, mister,' Sam Cragg said. 'Me and Johnny's been pals for sixteen, maybe seventeen, years and there ain't nothing we wouldn't do for each other.'

'That's the way friends should be.'

The cab crossed Seventh Avenue instead of turning and Sam exclaimed again. 'Why didn't you go up Seventh?'

'Too much traffic,' replied the cabdriver. 'Faster this way.'

Sam did not protest again. The cab turned north on Twelfth Avenue and after a few blocks took the ramp leading up to the West Side Highway. It roared along the drive.

'How'd your pal get hurt?' asked the man beside Sam Cragg.

'He was crossin' Madison Avenue and got hit by a car. 'Tain't like Johnny. He's pretty quick.'

'Maybe somebody ran him down on purpose,' the man said suggestively. 'Has he got any enemies?'

'Johnny? Naw. Everybody likes him. Except Mr. Peabody, the manager of our hotel.'

'He may have an enemy he doesn't know about,' the man pursued. 'For instance, your friend may be sticking his nose into somebody else's business.'

'Then the guy whose business he's sticking his nose into had better watch out,' retorted Sam loyally. 'Johnny'll make a monkey out of him.'

'You're real good friends, you and Fletcher.'

'Yeah, sure, like I told you, we been buddies since—' Sam stopped, shooting a sharp glance at the man beside him. 'Hey, how'd you know his name was Fletcher?'

'Why, you said so.'

'I didn't, I called him Johnny.' Sam looked through the window, saw that they were nearing Ninety-Sixth Street. 'Hey—we're going too far.'

'Relax, chum,' said the man beside him.

He took a revolver out of his left coat pocket and showed it to Sam. 'Just sit nice and still and enjoy the ride.'

Sam gasped in astonishment. 'Why, you . . .'

'Easy!'

Sam groaned. 'This is a phony. I'll bet Johnny isn't even hurt.'

'He isn't. Now, that's off your mind, sit back and take it easy.'

'You're the one telephoned me. Yeah, your cab was nice and handy outside.'

'That's right. I phoned you from across the street. Sucker, aren't you?'

'Put away the roscoe, mister, and I'll show you.'

'No, thanks. I've heard about you. This is the old equaliser. I'm as big as you are with it.'

'You're as big as me without it.'

'This makes me a lot bigger.'

Sam glowered. 'What's the idea? I ain't got a nickel on me.'

'Your chum, Fletcher, has something we want.'

'Hey,' exclaimed Sam. 'The limping goose bank—that's what you want, ain't it?'

'That's right, fat boy.'

'Fat boy!' cried Sam indignantly. He started to twist around, but the man beside him reached across and stabbed him sharply with the muzzle of the revolver.

'Fat boy, I said. Now, let's just be nice and quiet until we get out to—out where we're going.'

Sam slumped back in his seat. Gloomily he stared out of the window. The taxi rolled over the Henry Hudson Bridge, along the Saw Mill River Parkway and some thirty-five or forty minutes later, turned into a narrow dirt road that ran through a heavy growth of young trees. The road was a rutted, bumpy one and Sam bounced about considerably. So did the man beside him, but he never relaxed his vigilance and the gun muzzle was always ready to swing quickly on Sam.

After five minutes along the rutted, winding road, the cab entered a small clearing and pulled up before a rustic lodge built of weathered, peeled logs.

'End of the line,' said the man beside Sam cheerfully. 'Climb out now.'

Sam got out of the taxicab. Leonard, the driver, stayed behind the wheel. 'I better go back and get the boss, Sid.'

'The boss knows the way out,' the man called Sid said.

'Yeah, sure, but he don't want us to call him and I think he ought to know that we got the fat boy.'

'We still got to get Fletcher.'

'Do we need him?'

'We need what the boss wants and he's got it.'

'I don't like the idea of bringing two of them out here.'

'I don't like the idea of being here,' Sam interrupted. 'I been thinking it over. You brought me here against my will. That's kidnapping and I can get the FBI after you.'

Sid grinned. 'You wouldn't do that, would you, fat boy? I'm scared already. Let's go inside and talk things over. Maybe we can work out a compromise.'

Leonard, the cabdriver, did not seem too happy about things, but he got out of the taxi and followed Sam and his fellow thug, Sid, into the log cabin.

The cabin was small, but nicely furnished in rustic style. There were only three rooms, a fairly large living room and a bedroom and kitchen opening off it.

Sid pointed at a couch with his revolver. 'Sit down.'

Sam seated himself. He saw a telephone on a stand nearby.

'Can I make a phone call?' he asked.

'To Johnny Fletcher?'

'Yeah.'

'You certainly can call him. In fact, I was going to suggest that very thing myself.' Sid signalled to Leonard to watch Sam and crossed to the phone. He picked it up.

'New York City,' he said. 'The Forty-Fifth Street Hotel. The number here is eighty-two R three.' He covered the mouth-piece. 'What's the number of your room at the hotel?'

'Eight twenty-one.'

Sid nodded. He waited a moment, then said pleasantly, 'Room eight twenty-one, please.' He waited, then shook his head. 'No, there's no message.' He hung up. 'Your pal doesn't

seem to be very worried about you. He isn't even hotel.'

'He's probably out looking for me.'

'In New York?' Sid drew a deep breath. 'Well, let's talk about things, fat boy.'

'You're going to call me fat boy once too often,' warned Sam Cragg.

Sid made a gesture of dismissal. 'About this bank—what did you call it?—the limping goose bank?'

'One foot's shorter than the other.'

'All right, so it limps. Well, that's all we want from Fletcher, the bank.'

Sam grunted. 'Ain't you got it?'

'If I had it, would we have gone through all this?'

Sam suddenly chuckled. 'You mean you two birds ain't the ones who went through our room this morning and swiped the bank?'

Alarm showed on Sid's face. 'What's that?'

'The bank's gone. We ain't got it any more. It's swiped.'

'You're lying!'

'Uh-uh, cross my heart. If you'd've asked me about the bank the first thing, I could've told you and saved you all this trouble.'

Sid took a step toward Sam, then thought better of it and backed away. 'You almost convinced me for a moment.'

'You'd better be convinced. You're wasting your time. We ain't got the bank. If you two didn't swipe it, I don't know who took it.'

Sid appealed to Leonard. 'What do you think?'

'Search me.'

'We could work him over.'

'You and who else?' challenged Sam.

Sid bared his teeth. 'You think you're really tough? Leonard, see if you can find a good piece of rope.'

rd went into the kitchen and returned in a moment
short length of clothesline. 'How's this?'
'I'll do very nicely. All right, fat boy, put your hands behind
your back.'

'What for?'

'Because I said so.'

'You ain't going to tie me up?'

'Oh, no?' Sid came closer and pointed his revolver at Sam's
left knee. 'There isn't a house within a half mile. Nobody'll
hear. I'll count to three, and if your hands aren't behind your
back, bang, right through the knee. Think of it, bone splinters
rubbing one another. One . . .'

Sam let out a howl and got to his feet. His hands went be-
hind his back. Leonard stepped behind him and twisted a rope
end about each wrist, circled both wrists twice, then pulling the
rope taut, knotted it securely. Sid put away his revolver then
and pushed Sam back on the couch.

'Now I'll ask you quietly, where's the limping goose bank?'

'I told you,' snapped Sam, 'it was swiped from our hotel
room this morning.'

Deliberately, Sid clenched his fist and smashed it against
Sam's jaw.

'Once more, where's the goose bank?'

'All right,' said Sam, 'what do you want me to tell you?'

'I want you to tell me where the bank is.'

'It's in my safe deposit box at the Chase Bank along with
my diamond rings and my loose cash, consisting of fifty thou-
sand bucks. I put it there because Mr. Chase is my uncle and
he needs the six bucks a year that I pay him for the safety
deposit—'

Sam couldn't quite get out the last word. Sid hit him a
savage blow on the right side of his face, then followed with a
blow on the left side. Blood trickled out of Sam's mouth.

Sid said, 'What do you think of that, wise guy?'

'It don't get you the goose bank,' Sam said.

Sid drew back his fist to hit Sam again, but the taxi driver stepped forward. 'Wait a minute, Sid, I think he was telling the truth.'

'Maybe he was,' snarled Sid, 'but unless we get those coins we won't make enough out of this caper to take a blonde and her girl friend to dinner.'

'With those pennies and dimes and quarters you can take a babe to the Automat, but that's about all,' Sam said.

Sid looked at Sam sharply. 'How do you know there are only pennies and dimes and quarters in the bank?'

Sam realised that he had said too much. He shook his head, his lips taut. Sid looked at Leonard.

'You took the money out of the bank,' Sid accused Sam.

'It wasn't easy,' Sam admitted. 'The slot was pretty narrow.'

'Stand up!' Sid rapped at Sam.

Sam got to his feet and Sid went through his pockets, turning them inside out. 'Not a penny! Your friend Fletcher's got the money.' He nodded savagely. 'That's it, the bank was stolen, but it was already empty. Fletcher's got the money.'

A few feet away the phone shrilled. Sid whirled and went to it. 'Yeah?' He listened carefully, his eyes narrowing. 'I just searched him. He hasn't got a dime in his pockets. And he claims the bank was stolen from his room this morning.' He listened again, scowling. 'I called, but I haven't been able to get him. Yeah, sure, I'll keep trying. What?' He listened some more, then nodded. 'Okay, boss, he'll leave right away.'

He hung up the phone and turned to Leonard. 'The boss says for you to come into town. He's got an angle.'

'What about him?' Leonard asked, nodding to Sam.

'He stays here. Just in case. I'm going to keep him company. He signalled toward the door. 'I'll go out with you.'

The two men left the cabin.

The moment they were out, Sam began flexing his hands.

He twisted them back and forward, but discovered that the ropes had been tied too tight. He rubbed his wrists together in a semi-rotating manner, grinned after a moment.

Sid re-entered. 'All right, fat boy,' he said. 'Sit down and make yourself comfy. We're going to be here for a while.'

Outside, the taxicab motor began to purr. Gears ground and the noise of the motor became fainter.

14

A DRUNKEN sailor on shore leave after a five months' cruise in the South Pacific was no freer with his money than Johnny Fletcher when he had it. It was seldom that he had it, but when he had it he spent it. He gave the captain of waiters at the Beau Jester a five-dollar bill and when the man started to lead him to a table in the far corner, he tapped him on the shoulder.

'How about this table right here?' he asked, showing the captain the markings on a ten-dollar bill.

'Why, yes, sir, it's a very nice table.' He drew out a chair for Johnny. 'Would you like a drink?'

'Yes—milk.'

'Milk? You mean . . . milk?'

'That's right, milk. And I wonder if you'd mind telling me a little about this place?'

'Not at all, sir. We serve the best foods, the finest vintages and give you the best service in town.'

'So I've heard. Friend of mine down in Texas spent a little money here last year. Told me it was the best little place in New York. From Houston, my friend.'

Texas and Houston meant oil to any captain of waiters in New York and the one, by Johnny's table brightened. 'Texas is a wonderful place,' he said, 'and Houston!' The captain rolled his eyes toward the ceiling and exhaled heavily.

'Mister,' said Johnny, 'you said a mouthful! I ain't been in New York myself in ten-twelve years and I'm practically a greenhorn here. Used to know a few folks here, but I don't

even know where to look them up, now. I don't s'pose you happen to know old Jim Sutton?

'Mr. James Sutton? He comes here frequently.'

'He does? Thought he'd be married with six kids by now.' He snapped his fingers. 'Jim and I had some great times together. He had a cousin I liked a lot. Wonder whatever happened to him?'

The captain coughed, gently. 'Mr. Carmichael? I'm afraid—'

'Naw, I wasn't thinkin' of Jess. I saw in the papers what happened to him. Too bad, but Jess wasn't one of my favourite people, I'm sorry to say. No, I was thinkin' of another cousin of Jim's, Les Smithson. Great lad.'

'Mr. Smithson, mm? I didn't know him very well. Of course he came here now and then, but I was only the head waiter then and I didn't know him *too* well. I do remember, though, that he and Mr. Sutton were rather close friends. For cousins, that is.'

'Oh, sure,' said Johnny easily. 'I know what you mean. I got a cousin back in Houston. We fight all the time, but we're buddies just the same. We had a big spat a couple of years ago—regular knockdown and dragout—then the following week he was opening up a new field and needed a little ready, so who'd he come to? Me, naturally. And what's more, I helped him out. Good thing, too.'

The captain of waiters practically drooled. 'Quite so, sir, quite so. Mr. Smithson and Mr. Sutton had words now and then, but ~~they~~ were cousins, after all.'

'I'd sure like to talk over old times with Les and Jim. Or any of their really close friends, if Les and Jim aren't around town.'

'Mr. Sutton's in town, but Mr. Smithson . . . the captain hesitated. 'He, I believe, disappeared some years ago. Nobody seems to know what happened to him.'

'He went to Europe, maybe? He always said he wanted to do a bit of travelling.'

'Perhaps he's living there permanently now,' said the captain. 'I haven't heard about him in some years. Mm, I wonder . . . ' His eyes went past Johnny to a table along the wall. 'There's Mr. Wheelwright, he was a very close friend of Mr. Smithson's.'

Johnny half-turned and followed the captain's eyes to a sleek, well-fed man in his middle thirties. His eyes barely rested on the man, however, going instantly to his companion, Hertha Colston, who had been Jess Carmichael's fiancée and whom he had seen so briefly the night before as he dashed into the Carmichael home at Manhasset.

The captain continued, 'Perhaps I could introduce you to Mr. Wheelwright—if he doesn't mind, that is.'

'Hey,' said Johnny, 'I know the little lady with him. Thank you, Captain.' He pushed back his chair and rising, crossed to the table of Wheelwright and Hertha Colston.

'Miss Colston!' Johnny said enthusiastically, as he came up to the table.

She recognised him instantly. 'You're the man I saw at Uncle Jess's last night.'

'That's right.' Johnny pulled out a chair and sat down facing Wheelwright and the girl.

'Uncle Jess told me about you. He'—she half smiled—'he said you were fantastic. That's the exact word he used.'

Johnny chuckled. 'My name is Johnny Fletcher, Mr. Wheelwright.'

Wheelwright regarded him coolly. 'How are you?'

'I understand you were a friend of Lester Smithson's.'

'So?'

'So I'd like to ask you some questions about him. Exactly when did you last see him?'

Wheelwright looked at Hertha Colston. 'Just who is this man?'

'I'd like to know myself.' Hertha smiled at Johnny. 'Answer the man.'

'I just told you—I'm Johnny Fletcher.'

'And are we supposed to know who Johnny Fletcher is?'

'I thought everybody knew about Johnny Fletcher,' Johnny said cheerfully.

'All right,' said Wheelwright. 'We know you. Your name is Fletcher. Now, do you mind telling just *what* you are?'

'That's what bothered Uncle Jess last night,' Hertha said brightly.

'It doesn't bother him now, though. I saw him this morning. I'm now working for him.' He pursed up his lips and looked straight at Wheelwright. 'I'm making a confidential investigation for Mr. Carmichael.'

You're a detective?'

'That's not exactly the right word,' Johnny murmured.

'I see,' said Wheelwright thoughtfully. 'You're investigating the murder of Jess.'

'No,' said Johnny bluntly. 'I'm investigating the disappearance of Lester Smithson.'

Wheelwright stared at Johnny a moment, then he looked quickly at Hertha.

She seemed to hold her breath a moment, then she exclaimed, 'You think Lester . . . ?'

'Killed Jess?' Wheelwright finished.

'What do *you* think?' Johnny asked, looking at Wheelwright.

Wheelwright continued to stare, then slowly shook his head. 'It's so long ago. Yet . . .' He paused, doubt growing in his eyes. 'It's true that there was bad blood between Jess and Lester.'

'Just when,' Johnny asked, 'did you last see Lester Smithson?'

'Oh, Lord, it's eleven, no, twelve years ago. Mm, yes, it was the day Jess threw the coffee in his face. He told me about it.'

'Then you saw him after that lunch at the Harover?'

'Oh, you know about that? Yes, I saw Lester that evening.'

He came over to my place and he told me about it. He said'—he stopped, then went on—'He said he'd never talk to Jess again as long as he lived.'

'And that was the last time you ever saw him?'

'Yes.'

'Did you ever *hear* from him?'

'Not a word. There was a lot of talk for a while and then . . . we assumed something had happened to him—somewhere. It's years now since anyone even thought that he might still be alive. Lester wasn't the kind to bury himself, you know. He liked what he was doing.'

'Just what was he doing before he—disappeared?'

'Why, I believe he had some kind of job with his uncle. Mr. Carmichael can tell you, I'm sure. Well, maybe not. Come to think of it, it was that kind of job. After all, his uncle was the president of the company.'

'So Lester was probably a vice-president?'

'No-no, he didn't have any kind of a title. Neither did young Jess, for that matter.'

'He worked, then?'

'For a while. It was right after he graduated from Harover. His father thought he ought to come into the business and Jess didn't seem to mind too much. Not then . . .' He looked at Hertha. 'I'm sorry, Hertha.'

'It's all right, Don, I had no illusions about Jess. I thought—well, I guess every girl thinks the same thing—that I could get him to settle down, but 'way down I knew he was just—a playboy.' Her eyes dropped to the table.

Johnny switched back to the subject of Lester Smithson. 'How was Lester Smithson fixed financially?'

'He had to work. His mother was married to an engineer of some kind, who left her only a small amount of insurance.'

'Sutton's mother married better?'

This was the first time Sutton's name had been mentioned.

Wheelwright frowned. 'Sutton's made a pile, in the stock market, I guess.'

'You don't see a lot of him?'

'Oh, I run into him all the time.'

'But you're not as friendly with him as you were with Smithson?'

'I'm a working man. Advertising. In fact, I'm going to have my lunch now and get back to the office.' He signalled to a waiter who was hovering nearby.

'I guess I'll join you in a sandwich,' Johnny said. 'Waiter, how about a nice grilled hot dog sandwich?'

'A what?'

'A hot dog, a frankfurter—a wienie!'

The waiter regarded Johnny coldly. 'What are those things made of?'

'Meat,' snapped Johnny. 'Meat and—oh, never mind. Bring me a corned beef on rye. Just plain—no mayonnaise.'

'The chipped beef on toast is very good today, sir,' the waiter suggested. 'Or perhaps lobster à la Newburg, and salad with our special Beau Jester dressing.'

'Ugh!' shuddered Johnny. 'Tell me—is it possible to get a plain ordinary corned beef on rye?'

'No, sir, the closest to it that I can suggest is a Swiss cheese sandwich, garnished with—'

'No garnish. Bring me the Swiss cheese—just a plain ordinary Swiss cheese sandwich with just the cheese and the bread. And positively no mayonnaise. Remember now, put it down on the order—*no mayonnaise*.'

'I guess you don't like mayonnaise,' Hertha Colston said wryly.

'It makes me sick,' said Johnny. 'I can't stand the stuff. I once made a survey of the people in a restaurant and found out that eighty-three people out of a hundred positively hated it, fourteen didn't mind it too much and three actually said they liked

it. Yet in spite of that, I've been fighting a losing battle. Every da—excuse me, every doggone restaurant, café and hot dog stand in the country swabs the stuff all over your sandwiches. Those mayonnaise salesmen must be the greatest salesmen in the country. The mayonnaise salesmen and the ones that sell rolls with caraway or poppy seeds . . .'

'I think,' Wheelwright said to the waiter 'I'll have a sliced chicken sandwich—with mayonnaise!'

Johnny groaned. 'One of the three out of a hundred!'

Hertha laughed. 'But I'm not one of the three. *I* don't like mayonnaise either.'

She ordered a salad.

The waiter went off and Johnny said to Hertha Colston, 'Did you know about Alice Cummings before yesterday?'

The colour faded from Hertha's face and a shudder seemed to run through her. Don Wheelwright exclaimed angrily, 'That's a lousy thing to ask her, Fletcher.'

'It certainly is,' agreed Johnny. 'But the police are going to ask her that question, if they haven't already?'

'They asked it this morning—between seven and nine o'clock. They asked me a lot of things, among other things, if I . . . had killed Jess.'

'And what did you tell the police about knowing Alice Cummings?'

'I told them that I knew about her. In fact, I told them I had even met her. I also told them I knew about a woman named Maxine and one named Mavis and one named Madeline and a cigarette girl at Chasepp's and four chorus girls.' Her face was still pale, but she looked steadily at Johnny. 'He told me about some of them himself and, well, the gossip columns told me about the others. I—I was still going to marry him.'

'Because you thought you could change him?'

'Because . . . I loved him.'

'That's a very good reason,' Johnny said.

'More questions?' Wheelwright asked harshly.

The waiter came with a large tray of food. He set down Johnny's sandwich before him. It was nicely cut up into four triangular bits and one long, thin wedge. Johnny raised one of the pieces of bread.

'Mayonnaise!' he roared. 'I told you, no mayonnaise, *positively no mayonnaise!*'

'I'm sorry, sir,' said the waiter. 'I put it down on the order. No mayonnaise.'

'Take it back,' cried Johnny. 'And I want a brand-new sandwich. I can tell if the cook scrapes the mayonnaise off the bread and the cheese. New cheese, new bread, understand? Don't write it down. Tell the cook personally. . .

15

It was a few minutes after two when Johnny faced the doorman of the Harover Club.

Being a doorman for the Harover Club, he naturally spoke grammatically correct English. 'Whom did you wish to see?'

Johnny looked around him with exaggerated care, then said in a low tone, 'I'm an investigator, employed by Mr. Jess Carmichael.'

The doorman showed concern. 'I do hope, sir, that you will be discreet.'

'That, sir,' said Johnny with quiet dignity, 'is why Mr. Carmichael engaged me, instead of a regular private detective. Discreet, confidential investigations are my specialty. No one, positively no one, will even know than an investigation is being made.'

'Thank you, we would appreciate that. We realise that these things have to be done, but after all, this is the Harover Club and our members . . .' The doorman emitted a slow sigh of ecstasy.

'I would like to see the manager.'

'That'll be Mr. Whittlesey. Right through the door, past the bell stand, and the door on your right.'

Johnny entered the club, walked past the bell stand and knocked discreetly on the oaken door. The bell captain opened his mouth to question him, but caught the eye of the doorman who had followed Johnny into the club. The doorman put his finger to his lips, nodded gently.

The bell captain said, 'Mr. Whittlesey is in the billiard room, sir. If you'd care to wait. . . .

'I'll find him, thank you,' said Johnny.

He walked past the washroom into a large combination bar and reading room. A dozen or so men sat in leather chairs reading the *Wall Street Journal* and a pair of ancient Harover men were playing chess.

A group of sporty, younger club members were gathered about a table playing Indian dice for ten cents a game and received annoyed glances from some of the *Wall Street Journal* readers because of their restrained boisterousness.

Johnny continued on into a vast dining room, where some of the diners, having partaken of the requisite number of pre-luncheon cocktails, were eating and talking in normal conversational tones.

A club member was carrying a plate of finnan haddie in one hand and a huge mug of coffee in the other from the self-service food counter to a table.

Johnny tapped him on the shoulder.

'I wonder if you could tell me where I could find the billard room?'

'Same place it's always been, old man.'

'Where's that?'

'Second floor. I say, we're about the same age and I imagine I should know you, but dashed if I do. I'm Gately, Class of Thirty-three.'

'I'm much younger,' said Johnny. 'It's the business I'm in—puts years on a man.'

'What are you in, old man?'

'Books.'

The Harover man showed surprise. 'But I'm in books—Gately and Wakely, you know.'

'Sorry, laddie. Get out of it if you can.'

Johnny dropped his hand sympathetically on the Harover

man's shoulder and, turning, walked out of the dining room. He saw a flight of stairs leading to the second floor and ascended.

The clicking of ivory balls being knocked together led him to the billard room, which contained a half-dozen billiard and pocket billiard tables. Three or four were in use. A uniformed attendant turned from racking up a triangle of pool balls and Johnny crooked his finger at him. The man came over.

'Mr. Whittlesey here?'

The attendant turned and nodded toward a silvery-haired man wearing a dark gray suit. He was chatting with a couple of club members who were playing billards.

'There's Mr. Whittlesey over there.'

Johnny walked up to the table. 'I wonder if I could speak to you for a moment, Mr. Whittlesey.'

The manager of the club looked at Johnny with polite surprise. 'Why, I don't believe I know you.'

'You don't.' Johnny inclined his head for the manager to come aside with him and Whittlesey followed him until they were out of discreet earshot of anyone else.

'My name is Fletcher,' Johnny said. 'I've been engaged by Mr. Jess Carmichael to make an investigation.'

Horror spread over Mr. Whittlesey's features. 'An investigation here—at the Harover Club? This is terrible!'

'It needn't be. The inquiries can be tactful, discreet . . . or . . . they can be rather distasteful. It depends on how much co-operation you will give us.'

A little shudder ran through Mr. Whittlesey. His eyes went to the far side of the room. Johnny, following, restrained a slight start. James Sutton was at the farthest table, playing billiards with a pudgy little man. He did not see Johnny, however.

'What—what did you want to know?'

'Everything you can tell me about Lester Smithson.'

'Mr. Smithson! But he's dead—he died years ago.'

'Did he?'

'Of course. Everyone knows that.' I thought your investigation, that is, I assumed it would be . . .' He faltered.

'You thought it would be about Jess Carmichael the Third?' Johnny shook his head. 'No, it's Lester Smithson. I'm trying to find him.'

'My word,' breathed Mr. Whittlesey, 'this *is* a surprise. You say Mr. Smithson *isn't* dead?'

'I don't know. He may well be. But that's what I'm trying to determine. If he is dead, I want to prove it definitely and finally. If he's alive, well, Mr. Carmichael wants me to find him. Lacking an heir, you know . . .'

Whittlesey's eyes went again to the far end of the room.

Johnny said, 'Oh, Mr. Sutton's one of the heirs.'

'You know Mr. Sutton, then?'

'Yes. And he knows about this investigation. In fact, it was he that suggested it to Mr. Carmichael, Senior.'

'I see. And what is it you wanted to know? Wait, we had better go to my office.'

Johnny agreed and they adjourned to the manager's office, just inside the lobby. There, Mr. Whittlesey said, 'I did not know Mr. Smithson too well. He was one of our younger members, only a short while out of Harover. And you know young men. High spirits and all that. Of course a Harover man knows how to drink; still at that age . . .' Mr. Whittlesey smiled indulgently. 'You have to make certain allowances.'

'Smithson drank too much?' Johnny asked.

~~Oh no~~, sir, I did not mean to imply that. Not at all. In the time he lived here—'

'He lived here at the club?'

'I thought you knew.'

'I was simply verifying the fact. When Mr. Smithson' disap— left, rather, did he give up his room?'

'No, he did not. We ask our resident members to notify us

when they intend to be gone from their rooms any length of time, but Mr. Smithson neglected to do that. We held his room, just as it was, for some time and then we removed his effects.'

'Ah, yes,' said Johnny. 'I want to ask you about that. Who removed his effects?'

'One of our porters. Naturally, I supervised the operation.'

'Good. Now, think a moment, what was your impression at the time? I mean, had Mr. Smithson taken any effects with—clothing, personal belongings . . . ?'

'I don't have to think about that. I recall distinctly that I was rather surprised at the time. His room was exactly as if he'd gone out for an evening and had not returned. His clothing, all of it, as nearly as I could determine, was in his room. Except for what he was wearing, naturally. His shaving gear, even his toothbrush, was in his room. His extra cuff links, a valuable cigarette case, tie clasp, a ring or two, even his Harover class ring. That was all the proof I needed. Mr. Smithson did not disappear of his own free will. Something must have happened to him.'

'Don't think over my next question, Mr. Whittlesey. You've had all these years to form an opinion. Just give me that opinion, upon impulse. What do you think happened to Mr. Smithson when he walked out of this club twelve years ago?'

Mr. Whittlesey did not respond properly to Johnny's question. He hesitated, shook his head. 'Something happened to him, that's all I'm certain about. He was involved in an accident, or—or he was a victim of amnesia.'

'Amnesia?'

'I merely mentioned it as a possibility.'

'Because he was experiencing an emotional disturbance—his feud with young Carmichael?'

'No, sir, I did not mean to imply that.'

'You wouldn't go so far as to say then that Mr. Smithson might have been murdered?'

Mr. Whittlesey cried out in horror. 'Oh, no . . . not—*murder!*'

'But young Jess Carmichael was murdered yesterday. You admit *that?*'

'According to the newspapers—'

'Not just the newspapers. The police. Jess Carmichael was definitely and positively murdered.'

Mr. Whittlesey showed unhappiness. 'Mr. Carmichael was a, ah, an entirely different sort from Mr. Smithson.'

'Let me try this for size, Mr. Whittlesey. You will concede that there was bad blood between Jess Carmichael and his cousin?'

'They were young. Mr. Carmichael was a bit, well, hot-tempered.'

'All right, Smithson went off. He laid low, waiting his time—his opportunity. At long last he found it—and killed Jess Carmichael!'

'He waited twelve years, sir?'

'After twelve years no one would suspect him. He could wait another year, two, then make his reappearance and say he'd been in the Belgian Congo, hunting gorillas, or prospecting for uranium. Or he could say he'd been a victim of amnesia all these years and that he suddenly recovered and found himself working as—a clerk in a Carmichael grocery store.'

'I'm afraid that that is stretching credulity a little too far.'

'Well, try this one. Smithson had a fight with Jess on the day of his disappearance. Later that day he told Don Wheelwright about it. He worked himself up to a fine frenzy and went to ~~have~~ it out, once and for all, with young Jess. They had it out and Smithson lost.' Johnny paused significantly. 'Carmichael killed him!'

'Oh, no!' Mr. Whittlesey cried out, aghast.

Johnny shrugged. 'I've given you your choice of several theories. You don't like any of them. You try one.'

'I've given you my opinion.'

'But I don't like it. And there's still Jess's death to take care of.'

'I should think,' Mr. Whittlesey said stiffly, 'that should be obvious. Young Mr. Carmichael got involved with a—a woman. A woman of, shall we say, poor repute?'

'Oh, you can say it, all right. But she wasn't in the apartment when he was shot.'

'There's only *her* word for that.'

'One of the neighbours heard the shot after she'd left the apartment. Some minutes later.'

Mr. Whittlesey hesitated. 'Perhaps someone entered her apartment after she left.'

'Someone did, all right. The question is—who?'

'Exactly.' Then the club manager winced. 'We're back to the—the other matter.'

'I always come back to that,' Johnny said. 'Every time I think about it, I come back to that. Of course, there's always the possibility that Miss Cummings, the young lady involved, had another gentleman friend.'

'That's it,' exclaimed Mr. Whittlesey eagerly.

'A man named Harry Flanagan, for instance?'

'Flanagan? I don't believe I know the name.'

'A hoodlum, a no-good—perhaps a gigolo.'

'Ah, yes!'

'Perhaps he was afraid his meal ticket was going to be punched out on him. Perhaps he was—jealous—if such creatures can be jealous.'

'Do the—the police know about this Flanagan?'

'No.'

'There is such a person?'

'There is.'

'Then,' said the club manager firmly, 'I believe the police should be informed of him. That is by far the most likely prospect of all.'

'There's only one thing wrong with that,' Johnny said doggedly. 'I'm not engaged to find the murderer of Jess Carmichael the Third. My job's to find Lester Smithson—or what happened to him, if he *is* dead.'

'I'm afraid I've told you as much as I know.'

'Except for one or two small things. You intimated that young Smithson was a bit indiscreet, at times? With his whisky and such. Would you say that he, ah, got soused here?'

'No, sir, I did not mean to insinuate anything. Only—well, once or twice, some of the, ah, the members mentioned that he was a little noisy, shall we say?'

'And you told him to behave?'

'Words to that effect.'

'By himself? Was he noisy alone?'

'Sir!' exclaimed Mr. Whittlesey. 'You're not suggesting that Mr. Smithson had companions in his room—feminine?'

Johnny looked at him inquiringly.

'The club does not permit such things! No woman has ever passed the portals of this establishment—at least beyond the confines of the lobby, or possibly the reading room. We are *very* careful of such matters.'

16

His hands bound behind his back, Sam relaxed on the sofa in the rustic lodge. Sid sat in a chair opposite, watching him for a while, then, becoming bored, got up and wandered about the room. He went into the kitchen and Sam heard a refrigerator door open and close. Then the tinkle and gurgle of a bottle of beer being poured into a glass.

Sam gritted his teeth and twisted mightily on the ropes that held his wrists tightly together. They relaxed a little, giving him some play. But it was a fairly new clothesline and very strong. The perspiration came out on Sam's face.

Sid re-entered the room, carrying a glass of beer., 'Mud in your eye, fat boy!'

Sam relaxed and made no reply. Sid chuckled wickedly. 'What's the matter, fat boy? Cat got your tongue?'

'Leonard ain't big enough to take Johnny all by himself,' Sam said.

'Maybe somebody'll help him.'

'Who?'

'Wouldn't you like to know?'

'What's the diff? I'm here, I can't help him.'

'Fella who paid us for this job doesn't want his name known. No matter what.'

'I could tell him one thing right now,' Sam said. 'He's gonna be awful disappointed, even if he does get those coins. They ain't worth as much as he thinks.'

'That's his business.'

'We tried to sell them last night to a rare coin dealer. He offered us two for one.'

'Yeah, but what kind of coins?'

'Twenty cents apiece for the pennies, twenty cents for the dimes and fifty cents for the quarters. That's around thirteen dollars for the lot. If he's paying you out of the profit from that, you're working awful cheap.'

Sid frowned. 'We've already collected more than that. We got fifty dollars so far.'

'Apiece?'

'Two ways. We get another hundred later.'

'If your cutthroat boss makes a profit.'

'If nothing,' snarled Sid. 'It's none of your business.'

'Okay—turn me loose, then.'

Sid grunted. 'Just sit still, fat boy.'

He returned to the kitchen. Sam heard the icebox door open once more. He got to his feet, went into a half crouch and drew a huge breath. Then, exerting every bit of his tremendous strength, he gave his wrists a slow, mighty twist.

The rope cut into the skin, went deep into the flesh. Pain shot through his arms to his shoulders, but Sam persisted. A half inch, an inch—and then the ropes burst!

Sam's hands were free. But he was gasping from the exertion and pain. He stooped, snatched up the ends of the knotted rope and holding them behind his back, sat down again on the sofa.

Sid came in, carrying a fresh glass of beer. Sam was breathing heavily and Sid looked at him suspiciously.

Sam said, 'I could use a glass of that beer myself. It's hot in here.'

'It'll be hotter later.'

'I can't stick around much longer,' Sam said. 'He half rose to his feet.'

'Down, fat boy!' exclaimed Sid.

'I warned you about that fat boy stuff,' said Sam.

He got to his feet and brought his hands in front of him.

Sid gasped in astonishment. The glass of beer slipped through his fingers, smashed on the hardwood floor. His right hand darted for his coat pocket.

Sam lunged forward, grabbed the hand just as it was going into the pocket. He twisted it. Sid let out a scream of anguish that could have been heard over on the Saw Mill River Parkway.

'Fat boy, huh?' grunted Sam. He brought up his right hand, clenched it, then deliberately, almost lazily, cuffed Sid on the left side of his face. The force of the short blow tore Sid from Sam's grasp and hurtled him a half-dozen feet away.

Sid lay on the floor quivering. Sam walked over to him, stooped and took the revolver from Sid's pocket. 'Johnny and me can get rich selling the guns we collected today.'

He grabbed the front of Sid's coat, jerked him to his feet and half dragged, half propelled him to the couch. Sid's eyes rolled wildly.

Sam slapped him gently, but his fingers left marks on Sid's face. 'Who hired you for this caper?' he asked.

Sid was conscious but seemed to have trouble speaking. His mouth opened, closed and opened again. Sam slapped him with his left hand just so Sid would not go around with his head lopsided.

'I asked you a question.'

'H-H-Harry F-F-Flanagan,' gasped Sid.

'Who's Harry Flanagan?'

'Just a—a g-guy I know.'

Then Sam recalled having heard the name that morning. Eddie Miller had given it. He was the single who had called at the Forty-Fifth Street Hotel, the friend of Alice Cummings.

Sam put the revolver in his pocket. He looked around the room, nodded, then went to the door. He looked back at Sid.

'Good-bye, now!'

He opened the door and went out.

Outside, he started down the rutted road. The taxi that had

brought him out had bounced and jolted along this road for several minutes. It had not seemed to Sam that they had traversed any great distance, but a half-hour later he was still on the dirt road and beginning to limp. His shoes were tight, and he was not accustomed to too much walking. Another ten minutes, however, brought him to the parkway. Cars whizzed by in both directions. Sam got on the New York-bound side and used his thumb.

A dozen cars whipped past, another dozen and Sam became desperate. His breakfast had been skimpy that morning and it must now be lunchtime or later. His stomach growled, he became faint from hunger. And his feet ached terribly.

Brakes squealed and a 1937 Chevrolet pulled up beside Sam. 'I'm only goin' a little way,' he said, 'but if you want a lift, you're welcome.'

'Thanks, mister, you saved my life,' cried Sam. He piled into the Chevvy beside the driver.

'How far's it to New York?' he asked.

'I dunno rightly,' was the reply. 'I ain't been there in three-four years. But Peekskill's just a hop and a jump from here and that's where I'm going. That all right for you?'

'It certainly is!'

The little car roared along, turning off the parkway a few minutes later. It rattled along a street, paved with large cobblestones, then turned down a street lined with stores and small office and professional buildings.

'Anywhere special you want me to drop you?' Sam's deliverer asked.

'Some place where I can get something to eat. I'm so hungry I could eat a stuffed moose. Say—that hotel there looks pretty good.' An inspiration had suddenly struck Sam. He had no money in his pocket, but he simply had to eat.

The man pulled up before the hotel. Sam got out. 'Thanks a million, mister. You saved my life.'

'You're entirely welcome. Always glad to help a neighbour.'

Sam entered the lobby, a fairly large one. He brightened when he saw a dining room off it. A man came out picking his teeth with a toothpick.

Sam found a leather chair not too far from the desk. A bell-boy walked through the lobby. One came in from the front, went into the dining room. The first bellboy took up a post near the desk. Five minutes went by. Sam got a whiff of roast beef from the dining room and practically drooled.

Another five minutes. Then the bellboy turned from the desk. 'Mr. Pinkley, calling Mr. Pinkley.'

Sam got to his feet. The bellboy walked toward the front of the lobby and called out Mr. Pinkley's name. He returned to the desk, calling once more.

No Mr. Pinkley showed up. That was enough for Sam.

He strode into the dining room and seated himself at a table for two. A waiter came up promptly.

'Will you have a cocktail before lunch?' he asked politely.

'Naw, don't bother. I want the biggest, thickest steak in the house. No—never mind, a steak takes too long to cook. What've you got that's ready?'

'We have prime ribs of beef, roast veal——'

'The beef,' cried Sam. 'A double order and all the trimmings that don't take too much time. Potatoes, gravy, a lot of gravy, the works. And make it snappy.'

'Yes, sir,' said the waiter happily. He went off. A moment later he returned with a silver dish full of bread and rolls. Sam munched until his order came. He ate every scrap of the food, mopped up the gravy, drank his third cup of coffee and leaned back, contented.

The waiter laid the check face down before him. Sam turned it over, saw the amount, \$4.35 and beamed. 'Lemme have—your pencil, Buddy.' The waiter gave him a pencil and Sam scribbled the name, 'Mr. Pinkley.'

'Your room number, sir,' the waiter reminded.

Sam wrote down Room 821, then went through the motions of searching his pocket for change. 'I don't seem to have any change. I'll just add the tip to the check.'

He scribbled: 'Tip, \$1.00'

He handed the check to the waiter. 'How's that, pal?'

The waiter stared at the check. 'One moment, please.' He headed swiftly for the door leading to the lobby. Sam, startled, got to his feet. He heard the waiter call out, 'Mr. Pinkley—if you please!'

Sam winced and decided to brazen it out.

The waiter returned, accompanied by a heavy-set man of about forty. The heavy-set man was scowling at the check the waiter had given him and the waiter was chattering excitedly, although Sam could not hear the words.

Sam went to meet them. 'What's the matter?' he asked deliberately. 'I just signed the tab for the check, that's all.'

'That is *not* all,' said the heavy-set man firmly. 'You signed the name Mr. Pinkley. I, sir, am Mr. Pinkley.'

Sam gulped. 'What a coincidence, two of us by the same name staying at the same hotel.'

'I am *not* staying here,' Mr. Pinkley snapped. 'I, sir, am the manager of the hotel!'

Sam staggered, rocked by the blow. He gulped down air, made a clawing motion with his right hand, then said weakly, 'Well, whaddya know, the manager's got the same name I have. I—I just checked in a little while ago.'

'Did you?' Mr. Pinkley asked icily. 'Into Room eight twenty-one?'

'Yeah, Room eight twenty-one—that's right.'

'And Room eight twenty-one is on the eighth floor?'

'It always is.'

'Precisely. Now, there is only one thing wrong with that—there is no eighth floor in this hotel. It has only four stories.'

'Oh, no!' cried Sam, in mortal anguish.

Mr. Pinkley raised his hand, began snapping his fingers. Two waiters came forward, a third and then a bellboy. 'The police,' Mr. Pinkley called. 'Call the police.'

'Not the cops, mister,' begged Sam. 'I—I can't go to jail. I was so hungry I couldn't help myself. I—I'll wash dishes, anything.'

'You forged my signature,' said Mr. Pinkley coldly. 'No one can forge my signature. Positively no one.'

The waiters were surrounding poor Sam. Urged on by Johnny Fletcher or led by him, Sam would have scattered the waiters—and the manager—like tenpins and made his escape. Leaderless he was an ox to the slaughter. It was only seconds before policemen, two of them, entered the dining room and Sam found himself, with handcuffs on his wrists, led to a police car.

THE desk sergeant poised his pen over the police blotter. 'Name?'

'Sam Cragg.'

'K-r-a-g?'

'C-r-a-g-g, anybody knows that. But look, Captain, this is all a mistake.'

'It sure is. Previous convictions?'

'Whaddya mean, previous convictions?' asked Sam indignantly. 'Do I look like a crook?'

'Yes. Now, you might as well tell the truth, because we'll only check your fingerprints and it'll be so much the worse for you if you lie. How many previous convictions?'

'None! I ain't even been in the clink before—well, hardly ever—and it wasn't for anything serious. Just——'

'Just what?'

'Little things, that's all. Mistakes, that's all. Like now, this is a big mistake. I can explain.'

The desk sergeant looked at the two arresting officers. 'What's the charge?'

'Larceny. Forgery,' said one of the policemen.

'Oh, sure, just little things,' said the desk sergeant sarcastically.

'Can you put down just plain dumbness, Sa.ge?' grinned one of the policemen.

'Who's dumb?' challenged Sam.

'You æe, stupid,' retorted the policeman. 'Otherwise you wouldn't go into a hotel dining room and sign the manager's

name to the check and then, to make it worse, put down Room eight hundred and something when the hotel's only got four floors.'

Sam winced. 'Anybody can make a mistake. Johnny pulled the same stunt and it worked. There wasn't nothing . . .' Sam stopped realising that he was talking too much. He said desperately, 'Ain't it true that a prisoner's allowed to make a phone call?'

'A jailhouse lawyer,' said the desk sergeant. He shrugged. 'Yep, you're allowed one phone call. Go ahead, here's a telephone.'

Sam grabbed the phone, took off the receiver. 'Give me New York . . .'

The desk sergeant snatched the phone from his hand.

'That's long distance. You're not getting any free long distance calls on *this* phone.'

'But I don't know anybody in this burg. The only person I know, I mean the only real friend I got in the whole world is in New York. He'll come running out to square this beef.'

'He's a county supervisor. maybe?' asked the desk sergeant sarcastically. 'He can square this—this *beef*?'

'Maybe he's a Congressman,' suggested one of the policeman. 'Why don't you write him a letter? Everybody writes to his Congressman.'

'Look, Captain,' Sam said to the desk sergeant, 'be a sport. Okay, it's a long distance call. I ain't got a red cent in my pocket, but Johnny'll pay you. He's got five hundred fish in his pocket. He'll come buzzing round out here and pay you. He—he might even slip you a couple of bucks. All of you.'

'Bribery!' exclaimed the desk sergeant. He picked up his pen again. 'Attempting to bribe an officer . . .'

'No!' howled Sam. 'I wasn't. Don't put that down. It's bad enough. I just meant Johnny'll pay up everything. Everything I owe. The dinner—the lunch at the hotel, the phone bill.'

The desk sergeant could not quite conceal a grin. 'All right, son, I'll trust you for that phone call. Go ahead and make it. But mind you, New York City, not Los Angeles or Seattle.'

Sam caught up the phone once more. Hurriedly he put through his call, then waited. The hotel operator rang Room 821 and rang and rang. Finally, she said, 'I'm sorry, there's no answer.'

'Gimme the bell captain—Eddie Miller!' Sam cried desperately. 'This is important.'

'One moment, please.'

After a long wait, Eddie Miller's voice said cautiously, 'Bell captain.'

'Eddie! This is Sam Cragg. Look, I haven't got time. I'm in a jam. Have you seen Johnny Fletcher since this morning?'

'Not since about ten o'clock. He came in then and—say, aren't you kidnapped?'

'No-no. I mean, I was, but I got away. I'm okay. Except—I'm in the clink!'

'You're in jail? Where . . . ?'

'I dunno. Wait . . .'

Sam turned to the desk sergeant. 'What town is this?'

'Peekskill.'

'Peekskill,' Sam said into the phone. 'I'm in the Peekskill hoosegow. Johnny's got to get me out. Tell him I need him—right away.'

'I'll tell him as soon as I see him,' Eddie said.

'He knows that I don't like jails,' Sam went on. 'Tell him to make it snappy.'

'Sure thing.'

Sam hung up, sighing in relief. 'In a couple of hours Johnny'll be down here and everything'll be okay.'

'Maybe so,' said the desk sergeant cynically, 'although I personally think you need a lawyer more than a friend. All right, boys, take off the cuffs and put him in a cell.'

'Can't I just wait out here?' Sam asked.

'What do you think this is, a hotel lobby? Uh-uh, we got a nice room in back. It's got a bed in it. Of course there's no mattress on it, but if you're really tired you won't mind that.'

One of the policemen removed the handcuffs from Sam's wrists. The other held out his hand. 'Your necktie and belt.'

'I need my belt,' Sam said. 'I'll lose my pants.'

'Prisoners can't have neckties or belts,' the policeman said firmly. 'It's against the rules. They might hang themselves.'

'I ain't going to hang myself.'

'Your belt!'

Sam groaned. He removed his belt and discovered that his trousers were not too loose around the waist. An occasional hitch would keep them up. He surrendered the belt and necktie. Then one of the policemen began feeling his pockets.

He exclaimed in chagrin. 'What's this?'

He brought out the revolver that Sam had taken from Sid. 'Holy smoke, we didn't search him when we made the arrest.'

The second policeman winced. 'I didn't think he'd be carrying a gun and pulling a cheap job like that.' He handed the weapon to the desk sergeant.

'You boys are slipping,' the sergeant said. He picked up his pen. 'Carrying a concealed weapon—to wit, a revolver. Brother, that's a violation of the Sullivan Act.'

'I took it away from the guy who kidnapped me,' said Sam.

'Kidnapped!' The sergeant snorted. 'You're getting fancier all the time. Mm, forgery, larceny, attempting to bribe an officer *and* the Sullivan Act. Yes, sir, you haven't got a thing to worry about. Not for the next fifteen or twenty years. The State'll take care of you.'

'Twenty years!' howled Sam. 'You're kidding. Please, Captain, don't make jokes like that.'

One of the policemen took his arm. 'Come on, mister.'

Sam jerked his arm free of the policeman's grip. He appealed

to the desk sergeant. 'Don't put me in a cell. Lemme wait here. Johnny Fletcher can explain the whole thing.'

'Come on,' said the policeman firmly. He gripped Sam's elbow hard, but Sam again jerked his arm away and went so far as to slap down the policeman's hand.

The policeman cried out, 'Resisting arrest, assaulting an officer.'

The desk sergeant began to write. 'Resisting arrest, assaulting——'

'No-no, don't add any more,' cried Sam. 'I'll go quietly. Come on, boys.'

He started eagerly for the door leading to the jail proper. The policemen followed him.

There were three private cells in the rear, but each was occupied so Sam was led into the bullpen, a larger room equipped merely with two steel cots. Two prisoners were already in the bullpen. One of the policemen unlocked the door.

'In you go.'

Sam entered. The policeman locked the door and both went to the front of the station house.

Sam regarded his fellow prisoners glumly. One was a youth of nineteen or twenty, the other a grizzled old-timer.

'What're you in for, buddy?' the old-timer asked cheerfully.

Sam shook his head. 'It's all a big mistake. I hadn't ought to be here at all.'

'A mistake, eh? The cops're always making mistakes. What do you think they're charging me with?'

'I dunno.'

'Burglary, that's what.'

The youth made a wet raucous sound with his mouth. 'Vagrancy, that's what you're in for. You're nothin' but an old bum.'

'I resent that, bub,' retorted the oldster. 'I been in more jails than you'll ever see from the outside. I served time in

Joliet, Sing Sing and Alcatraz. I got a *record*. And whadda you got to brag about? Pinchin' pennies off a news stand.'

'Oh, yeah? Well, it just happens that I'm in for grand larceny, heisting a Caddy limousine, breaking and entering and resisting an officer. How do you like *that*, old man?'

'Yah!' The old tramp indicated the youth with his thumb. 'They talk big, these young punks, don't they? Tell him, pal, tell 'im what *you're* in for.'

'Forgery. Grand larceny. The Sullivan Act, attempting to bribe an officer, assaulting an officer and resisting arrest.'

The youth sat up straight. 'All that? You kiddin'?

'I wish I wasn't. The captain says I'll be in jail for fifteen-twenty years. I'll never make it. I can't stand bein' locked up.'

'Nothin' much holdin' you here,' said the old tramp. 'If I had an old saw or even a little crowbar I'd be out of here in no time. Lookit them old iron bars. Half rusted away, set in plaster or somethin' instead of concrete.'

He pointed to the barred window at the rear of the cell. Sam stepped up to it and looked through at an alley. He examined the bars. Age had crumbled the concrete foundation, age and the elements had weathered the iron bars. Sam gripped two of the bars, tested them. They wobbled in their concrete sockets.

He turned away from the window, his eyes narrowing. 'If I had a lever or something, I could tear them bars loose.'

'You and who else?' jeered the youth. 'A horse couldn't tear out those bars.'

'I'm almost as strong as a horse,' said Sam modestly.

The boy wrinkled his nose in disgust. 'That's the one thing I can't stand in these crummy jails. The bull the other prisoners throw. Always bragging how good they are at something. How many cops did it take to pinch you?'

'Two. But I couldda handled them easy if I'd wanted.' Sam's eyes fell to the cot on which the youth was sitting. It was made

of heavy tubular steel and contained a rusted spring. He dropped to his knees, tried one of the legs.

'Get up!' he ordered.

'I don't feel like it,' snarled the youngster.

Sam reached out, pushed the boy gently. He turned a complete somersault and came up on the far side of the cot. On his hands and knees he stared at Sam, goggle-eyed.

The little bolts that held the leg of the cot to the frame were badly rusted. Sam gripped the tubular leg, gave it a sudden wrench and it came away from the frame.

'Holy smoke!' gasped the old tramp.

Grimly, Sam strode to the window. He put the tubular leg of the cot between two bars and put his strength to pushing the inner end.

Iron ground in the concrete. Sam reversed his push, saw bits of concrete spew out of the loosened socket of one of the bars, then reversed himself again. He took a deep breath and put some real effort into it this time.

The iron bar tore loose from its lower mooring, leaving a wide opening. Wide enough for a man to get through.

Sam turned and looked at his cellmates who were staring at him in awe.

'You boys want out?'

The old-timer backed away. 'Not me. I got two-three days more to go, then I'm out. By the front door.'

'I'll go with you,' said the boy. He shot a look of contempt at the old tramp. 'The old coot's better off in jail.'

'I'll boost you,' Sam volunteered to the boy. He locked his hands together and held them as a stirrup. The boy stepped on Sam's hands and was raised to the window. He clambered through.

'Give me a hand,' Sam said. He held up his hand, but no hand from outside touched his. The boy was out and wasted no time making himself scarce.

Swearing under his breath, Sam reached up, gripped two bars still remaining and swung himself up. The aperture was a tight fit, but, by holding his breath and squirming, Sam made it.

On his feet, he ran quickly down the alley to a side street.

18

JOHNNY FLETCHER came out of the Harover Club and a taxi pulled up at the curb. 'Taxi, mister?' asked Leonard, the cabby.

'Yes.' Johnny pulled open the door, had one foot in the taxi when he saw the man inside. 'Oh-oh!'

'I want a word with you, Fletcher,' the man in the cab said. Johnny backed swiftly out of the cab. 'Not with me, chum!'

'Get in,' snarled Harry Flanagan. 'This is money in your pocket.'

'I've got enough money,' said Johnny.

'Then how about *this*?'

Flanagan's hand went under the left lapel of his coat. Johnny took two big backward steps.

Flanagan whipped out his gun, a .32 automatic, and lunged toward the open door. 'Come here, or I'll let you have it.'

Johnny continued to skip backward, almost colliding with the doorman of the Harover Club.

'You haven't got the nerve!' he yelled at Flanagan.

And Flanagan didn't have it. He saw the doorman, two or three men coming out of the club, some pedestrians. Too many witnesses. Besides which the taxicab driver, Leonard, wanted no part of a shooting on Forty-Sixth Street. He was already meshing gears, stamping on the gas pedal. The cab roared away, heading for Madison Avenue.

The doorman was at Johnny's side. 'Why, I do believe that ~~man~~ had a gun,' he said solicitously to Johnny. 'Are you all right, sir?'

'I'm fine. As fine as nylon.'

Johnny shook his head and strode toward Sixth Avenue. It was a one-way street and the taxicab had headed in the other direction.

At the corner of Sixth Avenue and Forty-Sixth Street, Johnny stopped. He looked uncertainly northward. There was someone he wanted to see in that direction, but he was worried about Sam Cragg. He had not yet found a clue to his abductors. Still, Sam might have gotten word to the hotel. He might even have returned.

Sighing, Johnny walked to Forty-Fifth Street, and turned toward the hotel. There was a squad car parked in the taxi stand, he noticed, but there were always squad cars around. The Forty-Fifth Street Hotel had a small bar in connection, where drinks were rather modestly priced.

Johnny entered the hotel. A uniformed policeman stood just inside and there was another standing by the elevator. Eddie Miller, in the middle of the lobby close to a post, made a quick, covert signal to Johnny.

Oh-oh, thought Johnny. He continued toward the elevator, slackening his stride, then snapped his fingers as if he had thought of something and wheeling, headed for the street.

Alas, Mr. Peabody came out of his office behind the desk at that moment and caught sight of him. 'Mr. Fletcher!' he called.

The policeman beside the elevator came to life. 'Here, you . . .!' Johnny pretended not to hear, but the policeman just inside the door caught his partner's signal and swarmed forward. Caught between two policemen, Johnny stopped.

'Hi, fellas,' he said.

The policeman came up from the rear. 'Your name Fletcher?'

'I park my limousine in a no-parking zone?' Johnny asked pleasantly.

The policeman shrugged. 'I don't make the charges. We got

orders to come here and detain a man named John Fletcher.'

'You've got a warrant?'

'I said detain, not arrest. We don't need a warrant to detain you.'

'If you think I'm going down to the station house without a warrant for my arrest, you've got another guess coming.'

Mr. Peabody came out from behind the desk. 'Arrested again, Mr. Fletcher? This is getting to be too much. We cannot have officers coming in here all the time because of you. It's bad for the hotel's reputation.'

'Reputation? What reputation?'

Lieutenant Madigan came swinging into the hotel. 'Johnny, what happened to Sam?'

'That's what I'd like to know.'

Mr. Peabody squealed when he saw the lieutenant. 'Lieutenant Madigan, please take this man with you at once. People are coming and going here all the time and I simply cannot have policemen all over the lobby.'

'Let's go up to your room, Johnny,' suggested Madigan.

'Why bother? If I'm arrested, we might as well——'

'You're not arrested. It's your pal, Cragg, this time.'

'Sam!'

Lieutenant Madigan stepped impatiently into the elevator. Johnny followed. 'You've got Sam at the station?' Johnny asked sharply.

'No, that's the trouble. But he *ought* to be.'

They got off at the eighth floor and Johnny unlocked the door of Room 821. They went in. A quick glance around told Johnny that there had been no more searchers in the room since he had left it in the morning.

'Now why,' he asked Madigan, 'should Sam be in the clink?'

'We got a call from the police in Peekskill. They arrested Cragg up there, threw him in jail and he broke out, taking another prisoner with him.'

Johnny regarded Lieutenant Madigan in astonishment. 'This is Sam Cragg you're talking about? My pal, Sam?'

'None other. And who else could tear iron bars right out of the concrete?'

'Sam did that?'

'He did.'

'I haven't seen Sam since early morning,' said Johnny. 'I went out and when I got back the bell captain told me that Sam had received a phone call that I'd been hurt in a traffic accident. He dashed out to go to me and no one's seen him since. No one, that is, except the people who snatched him.'

'How could anyone make Sam go anywhere against his will?'

'Oh, Sam's strong enough, but he can't punch bullets with his fist.'

Lieutenant Madigan scowled. 'What're you up to, Fletcher? It's that Carmichael business, isn't it?'

'I'm not interested in who killed Jess Carmichael.'

Madigan regarded him suspiciously. 'You're not playing cop again?'

Johnny did not say yes and he did not say no.

Madigan sat down on the bed and drummed his fingers on the nightstand. 'This is a courtesy pinch, Fletcher. The Peekskill police want Cragg and we're picking him up for them. He made a phone call to you here at the hotel, that's how we got here so quickly. When Cragg comes in we'll pick him up and hold him for the Peekskill boys. The Peekskill boys are not interested in you, unless they come up with an accessory-after-the-fact rap.'

'I haven't been in Peekskill in eight years.'

'Then they probably won't want to bother you. But they've sure thrown the book against Cragg. Grand larceny, forgery, the Sullivan Act, assault—'

'Are you kidding?' cried Johnny. 'Sam a forger? Why, he can hardly write his own name, much less somebody else's.'

'That's what they said over the phone. Forgery, along with the other items.'

'No wonder he broke out of jail. Forgery!'

Madigan got up. 'You're sure you're not messing in the Carmichael case?'

'I just told you.'

The phone rang. Johnny started for it, but Madigan reached automatically for it. 'Hello,' he said, then, 'Who? . . . I see. Well come right up, sir. Room eight twenty-one.'

'Sam?'

'Uh-uh, someone else. I'm glad to hear you're not snooping around the Carmichaels, Fletcher. Mr. Carmichael's a very rich man and he's got some important friends. Down at City Hall, for instance.'

'He's also got twenty-two hundred grocery stores.'

19

THERE was a discreet knock on the door. Johnny called, 'Come in.'

The door opened and Jess Carmichael entered. 'Ouch!' exclaimed Johnny. He shot a quick, accusing look at Lieutenant Madigan.

Carmichael nodded to Johnny. 'How are you, Fletcher? I thought I'd run over and talk to you for a minute, but I see you've got company.'

'He isn't company,' Johnny said easily 'He's a policeman. Lieutenant Madigan, Mr. Carmichael.'

Carmichael nodded acknowledgment but did not offer to shake hands with the lieutenant. 'I had a little chat with the deputy commissioner this morning.'

'I know,' said Lieutenant Madigan unhappily. 'I, uh, am assigned to the case.'

'Then why aren't you out working on it?' asked Carmichael curtly. 'I want the man—or woman—who killed my son. I told the commissioner this morning that unless . . .' He stopped, made a gesture. 'Never mind. Fletcher, I want a word with you in private.'

'I was just leaving,' said Madigan stiffly.

'Good-bye, sir—and remember, what I said.'

Madigan went out.'

Carmichael said, 'I had a phone call a little while ago. From a—a person who calls herself——'

'Just a moment,' said Johnny.

He whipped open the door and said to Lieutenant Madigan

who was standing just outside, 'That's the elevator over there.'

Red-faced, Madigan whirled away. He punched the pearl elevator button. Johnny waited until the elevator came and Madigan was aboard, before he closed the door.

'That man was eavesdropping!' exclaimed Carmichael.

'Cops have big ears.'

Carmichael looked around the meagrely furnished hotel room. 'I used to have a room like this once. Paid four dollars a week for it.'

'This crummy hotel charges us twelve.'

'Us?'

'I have a pal, Sam Cragg, the strongest man in the world.' Then, as Carmichael looked at him inquiringly: 'I'm a book salesman. I sell a book called *Every Man a Samson*. Sam helps me. We put a chain around his chest and I give the suckers, I mean, the prospective customers a sales pitch on how I discovered the secrets of health and strength and vigour. They're all in the little book. Sam breaks the chain by expanding his chest. And then I sell the books.'

'Not bad,' said Carmichael. 'Not bad at all. In my first store I had a big glass jar full of beans. Everybody who made a purchase had the privilege of making a guess as to how many beans there were in the jar. If they guessed the right number of beans, they got a prize of a hundred dollars in cash.' He chuckled. 'Nobody ever even came close. You'd be surprised though how many people bought jars of the same size and filled them with beans and then counted the beans one by one. They still couldn't guess the number of beans.'

'Because you put some big stones in the centre of the jar where they couldn't see them?'

'Smart,' said Carmichael. 'Only it wasn't stones—it was blocks of wood. Mind you, I didn't lie about it. I just didn't mention that the jar wasn't filled solidly with beans. I wouldn't

exactly cheat anyone, but after all, I didn't make a hundred dollars a week off that store.'

'A man's got to be sharp to get by,' said Johnny. "Cause if he isn't, there's always somebody sharper waiting for him.'

'True, Fletcher, true. I used to tell Jess all the time . . . ' He stopped, his face becoming sober. 'That brings me back to the reason I'm here. This woman who telephoned me—Alice Cummings, she calls herself.'

'Ah, yes!'

'She got everything she could out of Jess, but she isn't satisfied.'

'They weren't married? Or, were they?'

'Not that I know of. I'm thankful for that, at least. No, she wants to sell me something.' He paused and took a quick turn about the room. 'I have no confidence in the police. If I were to tell them about this they'd say I was a sentimental old fool. Oh, they wouldn't say it to my face, but they'd be thinking it. I'm too rich for anyone to insult me to my face. That's one of the troubles about being rich.'

'I wouldn't mind having such troubles.'

Carmichael frowned. 'When Jess was a small boy, seven or eight, I gave him a bank——'

· 'A bronze goose bank?'

'You know about it?' Carmichael asked eagerly. 'You've seen it?'

'Yes.'

'Where?'

'Perhaps you'd better finish first,' Johnny suggested.

'I had a dozen or more stores, by that time,' Carmichael went on. 'My wife had died and a governess was taking care of Jess. A governess and a housekeeper. I wasn't rich, but I was comfortably off. I spent as much time with the boy as I could, but it wasn't enough. I wanted to teach him the value of thrift, so I gave him this little bank. For some reason it

became Jess's favourite toy. I've gone into his room at night when he was sleeping and found the bank clutched in his hand.' Carmichael drew a deep breath. 'And then he grew up and I don't believe I ever saw the—the goose bank again. And now this woman tells me that she has the bank and wants to sell it to me.'

'For how much?'

'That's the fantastic part of it. Fifty thousand dollars.'

'Fifty thousand . . .'

'I hung up on her. She called back. Said she wasn't just selling me the bank, she was selling me the name of the person who murdered Jess. What do you think of that?'

'Mr. Carmichael,' Johnny said softly, 'she might have been telling the truth!'

'Are *you* crazy too?'

'Since yesterday more people have tried to get that bank from me . . .'

'You? You mean *you* have it?'

'I had it. It was stolen from this room this morning.'

Carmichael groaned. 'Why didn't you tell me you had the bank?'

'I didn't know it was so valuable when I had it.'

'The woman knew. She told me over the phone that Jess had had a premonition of his death and that he'd told her if something happened to him to give the bank to *me*, because it contained the name of the person who had killed him.'

'The bank,' Johnny said, 'was a plain ordinary casting. It couldn't have cost very much.'

'It didn't. I bought it for a trifle, possibly a quarter. I saw it in a store along with a dozen others. The bank itself had no value. It was what was in the bank that was important.'

Johnny dug deep into his right trousers pocket and brought out the handful of coins he had taken from the bank the day before. He dumped them on the counterpane of the bed.

'They got the bank, this morning, but I had already emptied it. *This* is what was in the bank.'

Carmichael looked sharply at Johnny, then scooped up most of the coins. He looked at them carefully, then let them trickle through his fingers, back on the bed. 'Pennies and dimes and quarters, that's all. I've heard these old coins have some value, but they can't have so great a value that——'

'They haven't. I've studied them carefully. The face value amounts to six dollars and thirty-eight cents. A coin dealer offered me less than twenty dollars for the lot. He may have understated their value, but I'm positive that shrewd marketing of the coins wouldn't fetch over forty or fifty dollars.'

'There must have been something else in the bank, something you overlooked.'

'I thought of that.' I fished inside, thinking there might be a piece of paper—something with a message. If there was, I missed it.'

'What about the outside? Were there any scratches or anything of that kind?'

'I assure you there weren't. I even thought that a message had been written on it, then the bank replated to cover it. There wasn't anything like that, though.'

Carmichael shook his head. 'It beats me. The woman sounded so confident, so certain that the bank was worth fifty thousand to me.'

'She said she actually had the bank?'

'Mm, she intimated that she could deliver it.'

'I wonder, if she wasn't possibly anticipating that? This room was ransacked this morning and the bank taken, no question of that.'

'Why didn't they take the coins?'

'They weren't here. I've carried them in my pocket ever since I fished them out of the bank.'

Carmichael again picked up some of the coins and scrutinised

them closely. 'I thought there might be some markings on the coins. There aren't.'

'My friend, Sam Cragg, was kidnapped this morning *after* the bank was stolen. A man tried to kidnap *me* less than an hour ago as I came out of the Harover Club.'

'You've been there?'

Johnny nodded.

Carmichael scowled. 'Kidnapped? Why . . .

Johnny shrugged. 'I can assume, in view of what you've told me, that the bank was stolen by someone in the employ of Alice Cummings. I can assume one of two things regarding the kidnapping, that Miss Cummings did not find what she expected in the bank—or that someone not connected with her is also after the bank—rather the message they believe it contains.'

'How a man could get himself so involved!' exclaimed Carmichael, 'That boy of mine, I mean. You've met this Cummings woman?'

'I have. And it isn't too difficult to understand how Jess went overboard for her. She's an extremely good-looking girl.'

'Hard as nails.'

'She wouldn't be that way with a man she was working. She'd be all soft and cuddly. She's got the looks to go with it.'

'Jess was engaged to a fine girl, Hertha Colston.'

'I've met her. She's worth a dozen of Alice Cummings. But Hertha is the kind of girl men marry, Alice is the kind they become infatuated with. The kind they buy mink coats for.'

'Pah! I'm not complaining about the money he gave her, the things he bought her. But that he should give her his boyhood treasure, the goose bank, that he should confide in her. . . . That's what gets me. If I had it to do all over again . . .'

He stopped and was silent for a moment. 'But I can't do it over again. Jess is gone, There's nothing left.'

In that moment, Johnny felt sorry for the multi-millionaire

'I know what you mean, sir.'

Carmichael drew himself together. 'Go to this woman, Fletcher. I've confidence in you, you're much like I was at your age. Not many people will pull the wool over your eyes.'

'When they try, I wind up with the wool,' Johnny said.'

Carmichael nodded approval. 'Find out what she knows—get the bank from her. Buy it, if you have to.'

'For fifty thousand?'

Carmichael grimaced. 'That's nonsense. I've never been blackmailed in my life and I'm not going to start at this stage of the game. By the way, how are you coming along in your search for Lester Smithson?'

'Quite well, I think. I've stirred up some things and I think I'll get results very shortly.'

'Good. I'm counting on you.'

Carmichael started for the door, but Johnny stopped him. 'Do you want these coins, Mr. Carmichael?'

Carmichael hesitated, then shook his head. 'No, it was the bank that Jess was interested in, not the coins. I bought him the bank. Keep the coins.'

He nodded again and went out.

20

JOHNNY looked down at the heap of dimes and pennies and quarters, then scooped them up in his hand. He spread them out on the bed, turned them all up, 'heads' upwards. He examined them carefully, then turned them all over, so that the 'tails' were up.

He sighed wearily. The coins gave him no message.

The phone rang, startling Johnny. He scooped it up.

'Yes?'

'Fletcher,' a harsh voice said, 'you want that gorilla friend of yours in one piece?'

'Who is that?' Johnny asked sharply.

'We haven't got time for that stuff. I asked you a question, do you want Cragg alive?'

'You haven't got Cragg,' Johnny retorted.

'Oh, no? If he's with you, put him on the phone.'

'All right,' said Johnny, 'suppose he isn't here. What do you want from me?'

'I'll call you back. I ain't havin' this call traced.'

The phone went dead. Johnny hung up and scowled at the phone. He scooped up the coins and looked around the room. He walked to the bathroom and saw the washing Sam had done the day before. On a sudden impulse he took down from the shower curtain rod one of the socks and poured the coins into it, shaking them down into the foot. He tied a knot into the top half of the sock, then taking down the other socks, threw the entire pile into a corner of the bathroom.

The phone rang out in the bedroom. He went back and picked it up.

'All right,' said the harsh voice, 'listen careful. Leave your hotel and walk slowly down Forth-Fifth to Seventh Avenue. A Lucky Clover taxicab will come along and——'

'Oh, go back to Peekskill,' snapped Johnny, slamming the receiver back on the hook.

The phone rang again instantly. Johnny jerked it off the hook. 'Go to hell!' he snarled.

The voice of James Sutton exclaimed, 'I say, Fletcher, that's no way to talk to a man.'

'Oh, you!' growled Johnny. 'Somebody else just called and I thought he was calling back.'

'I'd like to talk to you,' Sutton said. 'I wonder if you could come over to my digs at the Barbizon-Waldorf.'

'Can't right now. Busy.'

'I'll make it worth your while.'

'I'll try to make it in about an hour.'

'All right, but sooner than that if you can. This may be important. It's something about Lester Smithson that I don't think you got at the Harover Club.'

'Oh, you know I've been there?'

Sutton chuckled. 'You scared the hell out of Whittlesey. An hour, then?'

Johnny agreed and hung up. He left the room and rode down to the lobby. The policemen were still there and Lieutenant Madigan sat in a far corner, reading a newspaper. Johnny looked around, saw Eddie Miller near the desk and walked up to him.

'Gosh, Mr. Fletcher,' Eddie said. 'I tried to warn you, but Mr. Peabody spilled it.'

'I know, the louse.'

'Mr. Cragg phoned from Peekskill. He said he was in jail up there.'

'He isn't any more. That's why the cops are here. Sam broke out of jail and the Peekskill cops called the New York police.'

'Ouch!' said Eddie. 'Then Mr. Cragg is really in trouble.'

'He is, and there isn't a thing I can do for him right now. He's somewhere between Peekskill and here and if he shows up they'll grab him.'

'If I see him first, I'll try to give him the high sign. If only Peabody . . . which reminds me, I know the reason he's so sore. Some crook got into his room and swiped one of his suits, his best one, he claims.'

'Serves him right.'

'He thinks *you* stole it.'

'Me? Would I do a thing like that?'

Eddie hesitated before replying. 'No, I don't think so. But Peabody's really burned. I know he went into your room with his passkey, but apparently he didn't find the suit there. He thinks now that you sold it.'

'I didn't *sell* his old suit,' Johnny said, slightly accenting the word *sell*, 'but it's an idea. If he doesn't lay off me I might just do something like that one of these days. I've got to go out now. If Sam does happen to come in while I'm gone and the cops grab him, try to get in a word to him. I'll get him out if I have to bomb the New York police department. He can't stand jails.'

'That's what he said.'

Johnny nodded and stepped up to the desk. He laid a five-dollar bill and a single on the desk and said to the clerk. 'Have you got a roll of dimes and two rolls of pennies?'

The clerk was somewhat surprised, but took the bills. 'I think I can spare them.'

He opened the cash drawer and brought out three rolls of coins. Johnny tore off the paper wrappings and emptied the coins into his right-hand trousers pocket. Eddie Miller stood nearby puzzled. Johnny grinned at him and left the hotel.

Across the street, a Lucky Clover taxicab was double-parked, facing Seventh Avenue. Johnny put his thumb to his

nose and walked toward Sixth Avenue. A harsh voice yelled after him but Johnny continued on to Sixth Avenue.

A bus was waiting for the light and Johnny clambered aboard. A short time later he got off the bus, walked to Fifth Avenue entered the Chateau Pelham.

The switchboard operator recognised him instantly. 'Miss Cummings? I'll see if she's in.' She spoke into the phone, then nodded to Johnny.

'You may go up.'

Johnny headed for the elevator, then J. J. Kilkenny came into the lobby. He passed the switchboard operator and came up to Johnny just as the door of the automatic elevator opened.

'Have you been announced?' Johnny asked sarcastically.

The pride of the A.A.A. stepped into the elevator.

'I got words to say to you.'

'Why don't you write me a letter?' asked Johnny. 'Then I can read and appreciate your words at my leisure. Right now I'm pretty busy.'

Kilkenny punched the button for the fourth floor and the car went up. Kilkenny sized up Johnny. He was obviously making a tremendous effort to contain himself.

'I notice,' Johnny pointed out, 'you knew what floor.'

'I know,' Kilkenny said tautly. 'I know a lot of things.'

They got off at the fourth floor and Kilkenny pressed the buzzer of Alice Cummings' apartment. She opened the door. She was wearing a street suit that had probably cost in the general neighbourhood of three hundred eighty-five. She looked very nice.

'Oh,' she said when she saw Kilkenny with Johnny.

Both men entered the apartment. 'Miss Cummings,' Johnny said promptly, 'you know that you're responsible for furniture and glass breakage.'

'That's right,' the girl said, looking at Kilkenny. 'I'm in

enough trouble with the apartment house people right now. They've given me notice to move. I don't want a big bill added on.'

'Don't crowd me,' Kilkenny said to Johnny. 'I've already lost my job on account of you.'

'Which job?' Johnny asked.

'You know damn well which job,' snarled Kilkenny. 'The one with the Acme Adjustment Agency.'

'Good. That'll be a load off Sam's mind. He won't have to worry about that old mandolin rap. I thought maybe you were referring to the other job.' Johnny indicated Alice Cummings.

Alice Cummings flared. 'Have you brought those coins, Fletcher?'

'If you've got the seventeen dollars ready.'

She got her purse from a table and opened it.

Johnny said, 'I warned you, you're losing money on the deal.'

'I want what's mine, that's all.'

Johnny shrugged. He reached deep into his trousers pocket and brought out the handful of pennies and dimes. He held them out to Alice Cummings. She put the seventeen dollars in bills on the table and cupped both hands to take the coins.

Johnny, looking closely, saw that her nostrils were wide and that she was breathing heavily with suppressed excitement.

'And now, Mr. Fletcher,' Alice Cummings said coldly, 'I've seen enough of you to last me for some time.'

'Well,' said Johnny, 'I'd like to talk to you a moment—alone.'

'I have nothing to say to you.'

'I think you have. And I know I've got something to say to you.'

'Nothing you can say could possibly interest me.'

'Let's put it this way,' Johnny said. 'You made an arrangement with our friend Kilkenny here to, ah, retrieve a certain object from my hotel room. A goose bank.'

'Beat it, Fletcher,' snarled Kilkenny.

'Your cheap hoods ripped the hell out of my room,' Johnny went on calmly. 'They didn't have to do that to find the bank, because it was handy. But they didn't want the bank alone—they were looking for something that had been *in* the bank.'

'Breakage or no breakage,' Kilkenny said thickly. His hands came up and he started for Johnny. The latter moved quickly around behind a table on which rested a nice china bowl containing flowers.

'Here goes the furniture,' Johnny warned.

'Stop it, you two,' cried Alice Cummings. 'If you have to fight wait until you're outside.'

'You heard the boss, buster,' Johnny said.

Kilkenny stopped.

Johnny pointed at Alice Cummings. 'The real reason I came over is because a certain party came to see me. He said you'd telephoned him and offered to sell him something. Do you know who I mean?' he demanded.

Alice Cummings looked sharply at Johnny. 'What do you know about—that?'

'Everything.'

She hesitated, then her eyes went to Kilkenny. 'Why don't you come back in a half-hour?'

'I'm here now,' Kilkenny said bluntly. 'You're not going to pull a fast one on me.'

'You'll get your money,' Alice said, beginning to show her claws to the former bill collector.

'I'll get it, all of it,' Kilkenny snapped. 'I've stuck my neck out on this job and I want what's coming to me.'

'You'll get it.'

'I don't think Fletcher knows one damn thing. He's got a big mouth, that's all. He'll make you think black is white and he'll steal the fillings out of your teeth.'

'I like you too, J. J.,' Johnny said.

Kilkenny bared his teeth, but suddenly wheeled toward the door. 'I'll be back in a half-hour and I'm warning you, don't try any double-cross on me.'

He went out.

Johnny said, 'Carmichael, Senior. I'm working for him.'

'Why? Why should he employ a man like you?' demanded Alice Cummings.

'Maybe it's because he trusts me.'

'You? You're nothing but a two-bit chiseller and sharp shooter.'

'Baby,' said Johnny gently, 'that's rough talk. You're too beautiful for talk like that. Why, you're the sort of doll I could go for myself . . . if I could afford it.'

'I could go for you, too,' Alice conceded. 'If you had enough of what it takes. But since you haven't—'

'Has Flanagan got it?'

The name rocked her back on her heels. 'Who?'

'Harry Flanagan, the one and only. The gigolo. . . .'

That did it. Alice flew at Johnny. She struck him a stinging slap on the face. 'You filthy . . .!' she screamed. She tried to slap Johnny again, but he caught both her wrists in his hands.

'Whoa, Nellie!' he cried. 'You called me a two-bit chiseller, but I never took a quarter from a doll in all my life. Harry Flanagan's been taking everything he could get from you that you were able to squeeze out of Jess Carmichael. And he's been giving it to another doll.'

'That's a lie!' screamed Alice. She raked Johnny's shin with her high heel, causing him to wince. 'That's a dirty, filthy lie.'

Again she tried to use her heel on Johnny, but he shoved her away so violently she would have gone over backwards except her back was to the wall and she collided with that.

'Flanagan's a louse and everybody on Broadway and Forty-Eighth knows it except you.'

'Get out of here, get out of here!'

'You got everything you could out of Jess Carmichael and then when he got fed up and buttoned up his wallet you were through with him. Or maybe he caught you and your fine Harry Flanagan together . . .

The new trend frightened Alice Cummings out of her blind rage. 'That isn't true. Harry didn't kill him. He didn't. I know he didn't.'

'He's got a good chance of frying for it,' Johnny said.

'No! You're wrong. You—you mustn't put the police on Harry. He had nothing to do with it.' She ran forward, toward the table on which she had deposited the coins Johnny had given her. 'It's here—Jess told me. He gave me the bank and he told me that if anything happened to him to give the bank to his father. He said that the old man would know who—who hurt him.'

'There was no note inside the bank. I looked.'

'It wasn't a note. It was . . . ' She stopped, realising that she was going too far. She made a tremendous effort to compose herself. 'You said—Mr. Carmichael had come to you about—about my phone call to him.'

'He told me you tried to shake him down for fifty thousand,' Johnny said insultingly.

'That's a lie. I—I wanted to sell him the bank and'—she pointed at the coins—'those. It said in the paper this morning that he'd spend his last dollar to—to find the person who murdered his son. Fifty thousand isn't anything to him. He's probably worth fifty million. Jess told me it was—in the bank—and all I wanted to do was to give this to his father.'

'Didn't you get enough out of him?' sneered Johnny. 'Mink coats, jewellery, this apartment—the money you gave Harry Flanagan.'

She was sensitive about the name Flanagan, wincing again when Johnny tossed it at her.

'Leave Flanagan's name out of this,' she said. She became

suddenly vicious again. 'And you can tell that old goat that the price is going up. Tomorrow it'll cost seventy-five thousand.'

'Tomorrow,' said Johnny, 'you can eat that small change. And the limping goose bank, too. Although I suggest you use some salt and pepper on it. I imagine your stomach is pretty tough, but the bank is made of bronze and it may be a little hard for even you to digest.'

'Get the hell out of here!' cried Alice Cummings.

'Baby,' said Johnny, 'I'm going.'

He opened the door and went toward the elevator. She ran after him.

'Wait!' she called.

Johnny punched the button for the elevator.

'*A rivederci! Auf wiedersehen*—good-bye.'

The elevator door opened.

'Forty thousand. Tell Mr. Carmichael I'll take forty thousand . . .'

Johnny grinned nastily and pushed the 'down' button.

On the first floor he walked through the lobby, winking at the switchboard operator. Outside the apartment house, Kilkenny stood by the door. And at the curb was the Lucky Clover taxicab, with Harry Flanagan standing right by the door.

'All right, Fletcher,' Flanagan sang out. 'I'm through monkeying around with you.'

Kilkenny closed in from the side. 'Now, you and me are going to have this out!' he snarled.

Johnny danced aside. 'Do you boys know each other? You're both being played for suckers by Alice Cummings.'

Flanagan and Kilkenny had apparently never met before. Both looked at each other with hostile eyes.

'Who're you?' barked Flanagan.

'Punk!' sneered Kilkenny.

'Good-bye, now,' called out Johnny. He turned and ran

swiftly down the street. Both Flanagan and Kilkenny made as if to take after him, but each was suspicious of the other. When he reached the corner, Johnny stopped and looked back.

Flanagan and Kilkenny were facing each other, both gesticulating angrily.

21

SAM CRAGG was free, but he was thirty-five miles from New York City, without a nickel in his pocket. And the Law was after him. He ran from the rear of the jail to a street and he walked swiftly down the street and then ran through another alley. It wouldn't be long before the police would be after him. The old tramp would yell the moment he thought Sam was clear of the jail and not likely to return.

They'd be after him. He walked swiftly up another street, cut through a third alley and saw railroad tracks. This was safer than the highway, he thought. A train.

Of course he had no money, but Johnny and he had ridden the rods in the days of old. A freight train was all Sam needed.

A long platform was ahead of him. There were two or three people waiting for a train. Sam went up to one of the men. 'When does the next freight train go through here?' he asked politely.

'Freight train? I don't think I've ever seen a freight train on this line.'

'All railroads have freight trains,' insisted Sam. 'How else would they move their freight?'

'Search me. All I know is that there's my train coming right now.'

A train, pulled by an electric engine, rolled smoothly into the depot. The few passengers on the platform began to board it. Sam looked around him, caught sight of a blue uniform at the far end of the platform. He sprang for the steps of a car, scrambled in.

The train began to move. Sam went in and found a seat. The conductor entered the front of the car, scanned the tickets of the passengers, stuck into the metal wedges beside the windows. He took a ticket from a new passenger, came down to Sam.

'Ticket?'

'Huh? Uh, didn't you get my ticket at the last station?'

'I don't believe so,' said the conductor. 'I'd have left the slip there.' The conductor indicated the ticket wedge by Sam's window. It was empty.

'I was sure I gave it to you,' grumbled Sam.

'I'm sorry, you didn't.'

Sam began to search his pockets. Deliberately he explored pockets, then stood up and went through his trousers pockets. The conductor waited patiently.

'I know I bought a ticket,' Sam insisted.

'You may find it later.'

'Yeah, sure—I'll give it to you later. When I find it.'

'I'm afraid I'll have to have it now. Or the price.'

'How much is it?'

'To Grand Central? A dollar ten.'

'Okay, I'll pay.' Sam thrust his hand into his trousers pocket, showed exaggerated alarm. 'Holy smoke!' Quickly he reached into his breast pocket. 'My wallet!' He snapped his fingers. 'I left it at home on the piano.'

'You have no money then,' said the conductor. 'And no ticket.'

'Tell you what, buddy,' Sam suggested, 'I'll pay you tomorrow.'

The conductor had played the game all the way. But he was an old hand at this sort of thing. He said hastily, 'You'll get off at the next station.'

'I can't,' cried Sam. 'I've got to get to New York. It's—it's important.'

'You'll get off,' snapped the conductor, 'or I'll kick you off.
'You and who else?' challenged Sam.

The train was already slackening speed for the next stop. The conductor pointed to the door. 'Out!'

'I ask you, who's going to make me?'

'I'll call a policeman,' the conductor said. 'It's against the law to try to swindle the railroad out of a fare.'

The word 'policeman' was enough for Sam. He got up meekly and went into the vestibule. When the train stopped he stepped off to the platform. The conductor swung out and kept his eye on Sam until the train was moving again.

Five miles. Perhaps six. He could wait for the next train and try the same routine and advance himself another five or six miles. In seven or eight tries, he would be in New York. But it was the slack time of the day and the trains did not run too frequently. Sam waited on the platform for fifteen minutes, then left it—suddenly.

A policeman had appeared out of nowhere. There were always policemen around railroad stations.

Sam gave up the idea of riding into Manhattan by train. He walked through a little village and found himself upon a winding macadam road. A grocery delivery truck came along and Sam gave it the old thumb. The truck stopped.

'What's the matter?' the driver asked.

'I want a ride.'

The man grinned. 'Okay, I'll give you a lift—as far as I go.

Sam got in and the grocery truck drove all of a hundred yards and stopped before a house. 'This is as far as I go. I deliver these groceries, then go back to the store.'

Sam got out of the truck. 'Thanks,' he said curtly and started walking again. He walked a mile. The road wound to the right, to the left, went up a small hill and down into a small valley. It was a back road.

Ahead, there was a crossing. Sam quickened his steps when

he saw the road markers. When he came up he read: '*Peekskill, 3 Miles.*'

He cried out in chagrin. The winding road had led him back toward Peekskill. Almost half of the distance he had made on the train was lost. He sought the sign on the cross road and found a marker: '*White Plains, 22 Miles.*' That was no good. He had been in White Plains before and if he remembered correctly White Plains was at least twenty miles from Manhattan.

Reluctantly he retraced his steps, reached the railroad depot and crossed by the road. There he found a marker that told him New York was only thirty-one miles. He started resolutely down the road.

He walked. He walked a mile. A single car whizzed past him without even slackening speed. He walked another mile and an ancient car came chugging along. Sam stepped out as far into the road as he dared and waved violently.

Brakes squealed and the car stopped. 'For the love of Pete, mister,' Sam cried, 'give me a lift. My dogs are killing me.'

The driver of the ancient jalopy was a white-haired man crowding seventy. He said, 'Get in!'

Wearily, Sam got into the old car. 'Where you going, mister?' the driver asked.

'God's country, New York.'

The elderly man smiled slightly. 'First time I ever heard New York called that. You don't like the country?'

Sam shuddered. 'Not me. Gimme New York, just let me see it once more and I'll never leave it again. The things that have happened to me!'

'Nothing much ever happens out in the country,' the driver went on. 'In the city there's all sorts of trouble, all the time. I had the radio on just a minute ago and they were telling about some fella back in Peekskill who broke out of jail. A real desperado, shoot-'em-up type.' Sam wished that he could shrink

to half his size. 'Yep,' the old man went on, 'a real killer, they say. The police are setting up roadblocks all around.'

'Roadblocks!' exclaimed Sam in consternation. 'You mean—they'll stop all the cars?'

The driver pointed ahead. 'Wouldn't be a bit surprised if that was one up there.'

A New York State highway patrol car was slewed across the road, blocking most of it. The driver began braking his ancient car. A State Trooper waved him down.

Sam made a complete mental surrender. He knew he was going back to Peekskill—and this time he would remain there. He was gone, finished, done.

'What's the trouble, Carl?' the old man was saying to the Trooper.

'Usual stuff, Judge,' the Trooper replied courteously. 'Jailbreak. Some two-gun man they picked up shot his way out of the Peekskill jail.'

'Oh, they'll get him, all right,' said the man beside Sam.

'I'm sure they will,' replied the State Trooper. He scarcely looked at Sam as he waved the old driver to continue on past the police car.

For a full half mile Sam could not say a word, then he asked weakly, 'You're a judge, mister?'

'A justice of the peace, that's all,' was the cheerful reply. 'I've lived up here in the country all my life and the neighbours wanted me to have a little income in my old age, I guess, so they voted me in for an easy job. Nice chap, that Trooper. Most of 'em are good boys.'

'Sure,' said Sam, 'they sure are.'

He was silent again and the little car ate up the winding back road miles. After a while the car turned into a parkway and picked up some speed. But finally, as they were nearing Yonkers the justice of the peace said, 'I guess I ought to tell you, neighbour, the police don't approve of hitchhikers out here

and they've been arresting a lot of people. But Yonkers is as far as I go. If you're in a hurry to get home, I think you'd better take the subway at Yonkers. I'll drive you to it. Uh, could you use a quarter?"

He tendered the coin to Sam. The latter took it. 'Judge,' he said, with deep emotion, 'you're the first honest-to-gosh human being I've met in a year of Sundays. You—you almost make up for what I went through today.'

22

WHEN Johnny re-entered the Forty-Fifth Street Hotel, the policemen were still on duty in the lobby. And Lieutenant Madigan was still sitting glumly in a far corner. Johnny waved to him and went up to his room.

Entering, he went into the bathroom and retrieved the sock weighted with the dimes and pennies he had taken from Jess Carmichael the Third's limping goose bank.

'It's here,' he muttered, 'it's *got* to be here.'

He dumped the coins on the bed and began to examine them individually. He wished he had a magnifying glass, but his eyes were good and he studied the coins with elaborate care. Most of them were worn, a scratch or mark would have shown up readily on them. There was none. He counted the feathers in the Indian's headpiece on the pennies. They all matched. He studied the milling around the edges. There was nothing out of place. He turned the coins over and studied them.

He separated the dimes from the pennies, studied each in turn. A half-hour went by and he was no nearer the solution.

'It's here,' he exclaimed aloud. 'Jess Carmichael was no smarter than I am.'

He had the coins lined up according to their age. The oldest, he discovered, was an 1860 penny. The oldest dime was an 1862. The next dime was dated 1865.

Idly, he pushed the two rows of coins together, the oldest dime, the penny, then—a thought struck him and he moved swiftly, lining up the coins according to the dates, regardless,

of their value. The coins' dates now ran continuously 1860, through to 1939. 'That's it!' he cried. 'That's it!'

He raked the coins together, scooped them up and dumped them into his pocket. He started for the door, but wheeled back and picked up the phone.

'Give me the Barbizon-Waldorf!' he exclaimed. A moment later he said, 'Mr. James Sutton, please.'

Sutton came on the wire. 'I'm sorry,' Johnny said. 'I've been delayed. If it's all right I'll come over now.'

'I was wondering what happened to you,' Sutton said.

'I'll see you in fifteen minutes.' Johnny hung up, then picked up the telephone book and called another number. 'I want to talk to Mr. Jess Carmichael. That's right. . . . No, no, don't give me that. Tell his secretary that this is Johnny Fletcher talking. If she'll pass that on to him he'll talk to me.' He waited a full two minutes, then a woman's voice said:

'This is Mr. Carmichael's secretary speaking. Mr. Carmichael is not in at the moment.'

'This is Johnny Fletcher,' Johnny persisted. 'I'm investigating the—the murder of his son. Mr. Carmichael, himself engaged me this morning. Personally. I have something very, very important to tell him.'

'Mr. Carmichael still isn't in,' the secretary said, unperturbed. 'He was in, but he left about a half-hour ago.'

'Can you tell me where he went?'

'Mr. Carmichael doesn't take me into his confidence every time he goes out.'

'All right,' said Johnny. 'Can you tell me just one little thing? The telephone number of Hertha Colston, the late Mr. Carmichael's fiancée?'

'I'm sorry,' was the reply. 'I am not permitted to give out telephone numbers.'

Johnny groaned, but knew when he was licked. He replaced the phone on its prongs.

‘He strode to the door and went out, As he stepped into the elevator the operator gave him a quick look, then averted his eyes. Johnny rode down to the lobby and stepped out of the elevator into a scene of violence.

SAM Cragg stood at bay. He had a huge leather chair raised over his head and was defying two policemen, Lieutenant Madigan, and Mr. Peabody.

‘Nobody’s throwing me in no more clinks!’ Sam howled. ‘I ain’t going with you until I talk to——’ Then he saw Johnny. ‘Johnny!’ he cried in vast relief. ‘Johnny, don’t let them throw me in the hoosegow. Go ahead, tell them it’s a mistake.’

‘Fletcher,’ grated Lieutenant Madigan, ‘we don’t want to hurt him. Will you order him to put down that chair?’

‘Put it down, Sam,’ Johnny said.

‘Out of my hotel!’ bleated Mr. Peabody. ‘Out of my hotel. This is an outrage. I won’t take this another minute.’

Sam lowered the chair to the floor, but still stood at bay. ‘You ain’t goin’ to let them pinch me, are you, Johnny?’

‘It’ll be all right, Sam.’

‘It won’t be,’ persisted Lieutenant Madigan. ‘You know very well that I’ve got to take him in.’

‘No!’ roared Sam.

‘Out!’ screamed Mr. Peabody.

‘Cragg,’ said Lieutenant Madigan, ‘you can come quietly, or you can be dragged out.’

‘Who’s going to do it?’ defied Sam.

Lieutenant Madigan produced his revolver. ‘For the last time, Cragg . . .’

Peabody bleated again, ‘Please—no blood on my carpeting. Please . . .!’

Johnny crooked a finger at Madigan. ‘I’ve got something for you, Madigan, something that will——’

‘No! I was sent here to get Cragg, that’s all.

‘Aren’t you still on the Carmichael case?’

'I am, but first things first.'

'You think you'll be a hero, picking up Sam on a fugitive warrant? Would you rather pinch him and turn him over to the Peekskill police on a silly misdemeanour charge than bring in the murderer of Jess Carmichael the Third?'

'I'm not going to listen to you. And Sam Cragg isn't facing any misdemeanour charges. It's forgery, grand larceny, jail-breaking and——'

Johnny waved it all away. 'I can straighten all that out in two minutes. But, listen, I've got the murderer of Jess Carmichael. I can give him to you, all wrapped up and tied with a pink ribbon.'

'You can do one thing,' Madigan said bitterly. 'You can talk bigger and faster than any sidewalk spieler I ever heard.'

'You were in my room an hour ago, Madigan. Who knocked on the door and came in?'

'All right, I grant you that. You bamboozled the old man, somchow.'

'I've bamboozled the murderer, too.'

'All right, who is he?'

'I'll name him for you in just fifteen minutes. And you can then put the handcuffs on him.'

'Tell me now, if you want me to believe you.'

'No—I can't prove it now. I can in fifteen minutes.'

'All right,' said Madigan grimly. 'The boys can take Sam Cragg down to the precinct house and I'll go with you.'

'No dice,' said Johnny. 'Sam comes along with us.'

'He goes to jail!'

'No, Johnny!' cried Sam.

'Sam goes with us,' Johnny said stubbornly. 'You can bring your policemen along if you want to, but Sam goes with us.'

Madigan hesitated and was lost. 'There's no monkey business about this?'

'I promise you,' said Johnny. 'I'll hand over the murderer to you or I'll——'

'You'll what?'

'I'll hand him over. That's all.'

'Fletcher, it's my job to bring in a prisoner as soon as I arrest him. If I carry Cragg around town with me, I've got to explain the reason to the captain. If it isn't a good reason, I'll be pounding a beat.'

'And if you bring in the person who murdered the son of one of the richest men in the United States?'

'That's the reason I'm gambling. I know you're a slick, fast-talking sharp-shooter——'

'Don't believe him, officer,' cried Mr. Peabody. 'Don't believe a thing he tells you. I have reason to believe that he—he entered my apartment and *stole* a suit of my clothes.'

Johnny wagged a forefinger at the hotel manager. 'Some day, Peabody, some day . . .'

'Come on,' snapped Madigan suddenly.

He started for the door. Sam fell in beside Johnny and the two uniformed policemen fell in behind them.

'Oh, the things I went through today, Johnny,' moaned Sam.

'I know, Sam, I know.'

'First I was kidnapped. Then I escaped and—I was so hungry. My backbone was pushing my chest. I—I had to eat or starve, so I—he gulped, swallowed hard and shuddered —'I—I can't even tell you about it, Johnny. The thing that happened to me.'

'Tell me later.'

The squad car was at the curb. The two policemen got into the front seat and Madigan, Sam and Johnny crowded into the rear. 'Where to?' asked Madigan.

'The Barbizon-Waldorf.'

The driver used the siren until Madigan curtly ordered him to stop.

Five minutes later the police car pulled up before the Barbizon-Waldorf. A doorman came over, then backed away. 'You want to make a scene?' Johnny asked the lieutenant.

'Damn!' swore Madigan.

'Sam won't escape. I'll give you my word.'

'Yeah, I promise, too,' chimed in Sam.

'All right, come on,' snarled Madigan. He gestured to the policemen. 'You boys wait out here.'

'Sure you can handle it alone?' one of the men asked.

'I can handle it.'

The three men climbed out of the rear seat and went into the hotel. They rode up to the floor of Sutton's apartment, then as they neared the room, Johnny stopped. 'Let me and Sam go in, Lieutenant. You wait outside until I call you.'

'Don't give me that,' snapped Madigan.

'Play it my way.'

Madigan gritted his teeth. 'I'll be right outside this door.'

23

JOHNNY pressed the button of the door buzzer. 'Come!' called the voice of James Sutton.

Johnny and Sam entered Sutton's suite. Hertha Colston sat in a big chair near the window, a half-emptied glass in her hand.

'Johnny!' she cried. 'It's nice seeing you again.'

'Hello,' said Johnny casually. 'This is my friend, Sam Cragg.'

'How are you, Sam,' Hertha said cordially.

'You made a conquest this noon,' Sutton said, smiling. 'But I gather you didn't do so well with Don Wheelwright.'

'He's an advertising man,' replied Johnny carelessly.

'That's more than I am,' said Sutton wryly. 'I've got Scotch and bourbon. What'll it be?'

'Beer.'

'Beer? I'll have to send down for some.'

'Never mind,' Johnny interrupted. 'You said you had something important to tell me.'

'I have, but let it wait a few minutes. Uncle's on his way over.'

'You called him? They told me at his office that he was out.'

'He probably was. He called me.'

'Don's on his way over, too,' said Hertha.

'Good,' said Johnny. 'Suppose I telephone Alice Cummings and ask her over?'

'That woman!' said Hertha disgustedly.

Johnny grinned. 'I've got four inches of raw shin—and I think I've got three teeth loose.'

'You had a fight with her?'

'Not me with her. Her with me.'

'Uncle Jess said something about her trying to blackmail him,' Sutton offered.

'Blackmail? I thought she was merely trying to sell him something.'

'The name of Jess's murderer.' Sutton smiled thinly. 'I guess that's her description of blackmail.' He crossed and poured himself a fresh drink.

'Can I give you a refill?' he asked Hertha.

'This is a refill. That's my quota.' Hertha studied Sam. 'Is this the strong man?'

'If I was in a good mood, I'd show you my muscles,' Sam volunteered.

'Why, aren't you in a good mood?'

'Things—happened to me today.'

'Sam had a rough day of it. So did I, for that matter.' Johnny seated himself in a chair near a table.

'You've been trying to find Cousin Lester,' Sutton said. 'That's what I want to tell you about. I had a call from him.'

'What!'

'I was as much surprised as you, Fletcher. He said he'd heard it on the radio, about Jess—'

'Where'd he telephone you from?' Johnny asked sharply.

'Idaho. Place called Lewiston.'

'He's been there all these years?'

Sutton shrugged. 'I asked him. He said he'd tell me about it when he got in. He's taking a train tomorrow and he ought to be here by Sunday.'

The door-buzzer whirled. Johnny rose swiftly and went to the door. He opened it and Jess Carmichael, Senior, came in. 'I'm glad you're here, Fletcher. Isn't that the . . .'

'Yes,' said Johnny. 'You might as well come in now, Lieutenant.'

Madigan came in. Sutton and Hertha Colston looked at him, puzzled.

'Lieutenant Madigan,' Johnny announced, 'of Homicide.'

'Homicide!' exclaimed Sutton.

'Sam's under arrest,' Johnny explained. 'Madigan wouldn't let Sam come with me unless I brought him, too.'

Carmichael looked sharply at Johnny. 'You saw that woman?'

'I saw her. She's got the bank, all right. And she thinks she's got what was in it.'

'What was in it?' Sutton asked.

Johnny dug the handful of pennies and dimes from his pocket. 'This!' He put the coins on the table beside his chair. 'She wanted pennies and dimes so badly, I bought her seven dollars' worth. Pennies are pennies to her, and dimes, dimes.'

'This is what was in Jess's bank?' Sutton asked.

'Yes.'

Sutton looked at his uncle. 'A bunch of old-fashioned Indian head pennies—and dimes and quarters. I thought there'd be——'

'A note?' Johnny asked.

'The Cummings woman claimed——'

'That there was a message in the bank? That's the message.'

Sutton looked at the coins, perplexed. 'One of your jokes, Fletcher?'

'No joke.'

Hertha Colston got up and came over. She looked at the coins. 'I never saw these, but Jess told me once about the bank he had as a boy.' She looked at Carmichael. 'You gave it to him?'

Carmichael nodded quietly. 'He was very fond of the bank.'

'Can I have these?' Hertha asked, a note of wistfulness in her voice. 'It's—it might be a kind of remembrance.'

'There are some things I want to say first,' Johnny said, 'then I don't care who takes these coins. Mr. Carmichael, Miss Colson, some of this is going to be rather painful.'

'Go ahead, Fletcher,' said Carmichael gruffly.

'You all know about Alice Cummings. She's—well, she's Alice Cummings. But Jess was infatuated with her. So much so that he gave her one of his boyhood treasures and confided in her. Up to a point. He told Alice Cummings that if anything happened to him, to give the limping goose bank to his father. It would tell him who had killed him.'

'I don't understand that,' Hertha said, puzzled. 'It—it sounds as if he *expected* to be killed.'

'He did.'

'I stumbled into this thing,' Johnny went on. 'A bill collector came to my hotel and one thing led to another and he defied me to collect a long overdue bill. A bill against Alice Cummings. Nothing would have happened—that is, I would not have gotten involved in this myself—if I hadn't taken a short cut to finding Alice Cummings. I might add that the bill she owed was for a sixty-nine-dollar fur coat she bought four years ago. She made just a few payments on it, then skipped without leaving an address. With interest, the amount still due was seventy-four dollars.'

'I nailed her for that seventy-four dollars, but she only had fifty-seven dollars in her purse at the time. I held out for the other seventeen dollars and then the phone rang and Jess Carmichael was announced. Things hadn't been going too good lately with Cummings and Jess. She wanted to get me out in the worst way and without stopping to think she gave me the limping goose bank to make up the difference of seventeen dollars.' Johnny paused. 'Cummings and Jess quarrelled and she went out, leaving him in her apartment—'

'That's what *she* says,' Hertha put in spitefully.

I think she told the truth. Somebody else came in—some-

body who knew that Jess was there. *That's* the person who killed him.'

'Fletcher,' Carmichael asked soberly, 'do you know who that person is?'

'Mr. Carmichael,' Johnny said, 'this morning when I was here talking to Mr. Sutton and you were in the other room listening, he said that you started out in life as a telegraph operator. Was that true?'

'Why, yes, I was the station agent and telegraph operator at a little town in Ohio.'

'Can you still read the Morse code?'

'Once you learn that you never forget it. I might not be able to send a message any more, at least not very quickly, but I could still read one unless it was in International code.'

'Just a moment, then.'

Johnny stepped to the table and began sorting out the quarters, dimes and pennies. He lined them up, according to the date, beginning with the 1860 dime, continuing down to the last 1939 coin.

The others in the room watched him. When Johnny was nearly through, James Sutton suddenly laughed. 'You're a character, Fletcher. You spring your childish games on us and we're hypnotised. We listen to you and we watch you.' He chuckled. 'Do you know, Uncle Jess, that our friend Fletcher here last night hired a limousine to take him out to your home and that he charged the hire to his room at the Barbizon-Waldorf Hotel here? . . . and he happens to be living at the Forty-Fifth Street Hotel.'

'I've been to his room,' said Carmichael.

Johnny straightened from arranging the coins. 'Read it, Mr. Carmichael. Read it. It's the message your son wanted you to read.'

'I taught Jess the Morse code when he was eight years old,

said Carmichael. He looked at the rows of coins spread out on the table. 'I don't understand, Fletcher.'

'The pennies are the dots, the dimes the dashes and the quarters the spaces between words. Read it, Mr. Carmichael.'

Carmichael gave a start. His eyes darted to the coins. "'If Jess C. is killed,'" he read slowly. Then he gave a violent start.

'One of Fletcher's tricks,' cried James Sutton hoarsely.

'Is it, Sutton?' Johnny demanded. 'Does the message give his name, Mr. Carmichael?'

Carmichael continued dully, "'Jinn Sutton did it. He'" — he hesitated — "'he killed L. Smithson!'"

'That's a lie!' yelled Sutton. 'Lester isn't dead. He—he phoned me today from Idaho.'

'Did he?' Johnny shot at him.

'I talked to him,' Sutton said wildly. 'I—he wrote me a letter two—three years ago. He's alive, I tell you, he's alive. . . .'

'He's dead,' said Johnny bluntly. 'You killed him twelve years ago. Jess knew it then, but kept quiet. But he never trusted you. He was afraid of you.'

Carmichael faced his nephew, his eyes blazing like an avenging angel's. '*Did you kill my son?*'

Sutton backed away. 'He was raised with a gold spoon in his mouth. He had everything and I—I was poor.'

'Poor!' burst out Sam Cragg. 'How can a guy live in the Barbizon-Waldorf and be poor?'

'I gave him an allowance,' Carmichael said. He moved towards Sutton. 'I gave you money and you—you killed my son . . .'

'I needed more money,' Sutton wailed. 'I—I've been wiped out. I speculated and I lost every dollar and went into debt.' Sutton sank into a chair and began to sob.

Carmichael stood over him, his big body seemed to slump and he aged before Johnny's eyes. 'Hertha Colston moved

tip to him quietly and put her arms about Carmichael's shoulders.

Carmichael looked at her and smiled wanly. 'They told me when he was a boy that he had a vicious streak in him. I—I thought he'd outgrown it. I would have made him my heir. . . .'

'He counted on that,' Johnny said soberly. 'He hired me last night to find Lester Smithson. He knew very well that I wouldn't be able to do that, but he figured it was a good thing, to throw suspicion in another direction. Blame Lester Smithson. Lester had reason to kill Jess, he figured. If he could make you believe that Lester had come back and killed Jess he was all right.'

Lieutenant Madigan moved forward. He snapped a pair of handcuffs on Sutton's wrists and said, 'We'll get a statement from him down at Headquarters.'

The phone rang suddenly, shrilly. Everyone in the room looked at it, but no one moved toward it. Johnny finally stepped across the room and picked it up. 'Yes? Who?' He winced. 'Yes, he's here.' He covered the mouthpiece. 'Mr. Carmichael, it's Alice Cummings. She wants to talk to you.'

'I have nothing to say to her.'

Johnny said into the phone, 'Sorry, babe, Mr. Carmichael has nothing to say to you. . . . Yes, it's me, your old friend, Johnny Fletcher. . . .' He winced again. 'You've cut your price to ten thousand? For what. . . . Oh, the pennies and dimes, eh?'

'Let me talk to her,' Hertha said suddenly.

'She wants to sell seven dollars' worth of change for ten thousand,' chuckled Johnny. He handed the phone to Hertha Colston.

Hertha told Alice Cummings what to do with the coins.

24

JOHNNY and Sam shook hands with the lawyer outside the courthouse in Peekskill. 'A tremendous victory, gentlemen,' the attorney said enthusiastically. 'I told you I could do it.'

'You call a five-hundred-dollar fine a victory?' asked Johnny cynically.

'For forgery, grand larceny, jail-breaking . . .

'Cut it out,' shuddered Sam.

'A victory,' the lawyer said firmly. 'If it wasn't for the fact that the city prosecutor is my cousin and that I just happen to play golf with the judge, it would have been five years in the State penitentiary. Six months in the county jail, at the very least.'

'All right,' said Johnny. 'Thanks. Thanks a million. You did a great job. The next time one of us gets arrested in Peekskill we'll give you our business.'

'You'll be in good hands. And now, I must say good-bye to you, gentlemen. One of my, ah, clients has been charged with stealing a, ah a bus. Ridiculous, of course, but I must do my duty by him. Good-bye, gentlemen.'

The attorney bustled away and Johnny and Sam walked toward the bus stop where they would get a bus that would take them back to Manhattan.

'I'm never going to come anywhere near Peekskill again,' said Sam solemnly.

'It's a good thing Mr. Carmichael gave me that thousand dollars this morning. He didn't really have to give it to me,

you know. It was for finding Lester Smithson. And I found him.'

'How could you find him when he was dead?'

Johnny suddenly snorted. 'Imagine that lawyer—a thousand bucks! And cash he wanted, too. Before the trial.'

'I'm sorry, Johnny. We're just about broke again, we?'

'After we pay the bus fare we'll have about seventy left over.' Johnny shook his head and sighed. 'Well, that's bad. I was going to mail thirty-six dollars to Mr. Peabody along with the pawn ticket for his suit. But now, I guess, just mail him the pawn ticket. That's better than nothing, isn't it?'

'Yeah, but don't we owe Peabody room rent again?'

'Sure, but what's that? I don't think of something. I always do

THE END